

ALEXANDER SERAFIMOVICH



THE IRON FLOOD



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ALEXANDER
SERAFIMOVICH

(1863-1949) was among the founders of Soviet literature, and his novel *The Iron Flood* became a classic work of socialist realism.

V. I. Lenin held a very high opinion of Serafimovich and in a personal letter to the writer (1920) spoke about "how necessary your work is to the workers and all of us...."

Besides his famous novel, Serafimovich wrote many short stories, the first of which "On an Ice Floe" was published in 1889, and *Town in the Steppe* (1912), a novel tracing the history of capitalism in Russia.

"He is a real artist, a great man and his work is close and familiar to us,"

Mikhail Sholokhov wrote about Serafimovich. "Serafimovich belongs to the generation of writers from whom we, budding authors, learned to write."

Serafimovich's novel *The Iron Flood* is based on real events, the heroic march of the Taman Army commanded by E. I. Kovtyukh across the North Caucasus to join the main Red Army forces (summer 1918)

"To dip for several hours into the reading of *The Iron Flood* is to take a refreshing shower of associating yourself with heroic revolutionary actions; it means to be introduced to a work of great artistic merit," wrote Dmitri Furmanov.



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ALEXANDER SERAFIMOVICH

THE IRON FLOOD

A Novel



PROGRESS PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW

Translated from the Russian
Illustrated by M. Grekov and A. Kokorin
Александр Серафимович
Железный поток
На английском языке
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HOW THE IRON FLOOD WAS CONCEIVED AND WRITTEN

A strange thing, it was not from the plot, nor from the characters, nor from events, and not even from a clearly defined initial idea that *The Iron Flood* took its beginning.

Shortly before the First World War broke out, my son Anatoli decided to climb the watershed of the Caucasian Range, which began near the town of Novorossiisk and towered haughtily over sea and steppe.

Gray cliffs, gaping gorges and above, high in the sky, the whiteness of either shining summer clouds or of dazzling snow caps.

As we climbed higher and higher, the sea was shut off by the crags rising all around us. The air became rare, and the breathing quickened. Dazzling white clouds floated above, all but scraping our heads. The heat was almost a tangible thing, the way it can only be high in the mountains.

Suddenly the crags retreated. We stopped in amazement. The Caucasian Range, this mammoth watershed, had narrowed down almost to a razor-blade thinness. Both on the right and the left, there were sheer bottomless precipices. The sea on the right had reared up into a wall, an immovable wall of molten blue—we could not distinguish any ripples at that distance. To the left, far down, crowded the blue flocks of wooded foothills, and beyond these was the expanse of the Kuban Steppe.

We stood in reverent silence on the narrow isthmus, not more than two metres wide, and stared at the map of the world that lay open before us.

Then we went on. The narrow isthmus was left behind, the blue foothills and the far-off steppe had disappeared from view. So had the vast motionless expanse of the sea. Again there were crags all about us, again there were plane trees and rhododendron bushes, again the mighty range had squared its broad shoulders.

The October Revolution had won.

Moscow was already wholly Red, my own dear revolutionary city. Gaping with the black holes of windows, her streets pocked with shells, her walls riddled with bullets. And her

people ragged and hungry, their sunken eyes shining with a lofty light.

What about me, where was my place?

I added my modest effort to the unprecedented struggle-construction, writing appeals, addresses, articles, sending in reports from the fighting fronts, but I was still persecuted by the nagging feeling that I was not doing what I ought to have been doing, not doing my very best. I had to do something big, something that would in some measure live up to the great work of clearance that was being done on the ruins of the old world, there were things that needed to be cleared on the one hand and built on the other in literature, too. I felt I had to do something that had a scope.

How?

I remembered an incident from the time before the First World War: my motorcycle I called "Devil" sped along the meandering gray highway, and to the left were mountains and to the right the blueness of the sea. I made a stop in the mountains, propped up my Devil and went into a peasant's cottage to buy some milk. He told me he had moved here from Ryazan Gubernia, driven by poverty. He had a crowd of small children, a wife exhausted by wearisome toil and two very old parents who would have done better to die, but who lived and had to be fed.

He had begun by sowing some wheat—instead of planting plum-trees or vines which grew splendidly in those parts—no, he sowed wheat. It grew tall and lovely, the ears magnificently big and heavy. The entire family watched it with bated breath. Another couple of days and it would be ready for reaping.

And then a cloud came over and hovered, dark, over the mountain. A shower came down, rivulets swelled and overflowed, dragging trees and boulders along. A quarter of an hour later the wheat field was a dark mess furrowed by the boulders. Nobody would ever have guessed that golden corn had been swaying here, that long hours of inhuman toil had been put into it. The peasant's head was weighted down to his knees. Hungry children swarmed around.

Should I perhaps write a book about this peasant lost in the mountains? There was no way out for him, no social way out, that is. Back in his Ryazan Gubernia the landowner, the kulak, the priest and the police officer had

their teeth sunk into his flesh. Here he was alone, face to face with the mountains, the forests, the crags, the gorges and the sea—but he was doomed, too, because he was in unfamiliar surroundings, robbed of his centuries-old experience, unable to tackle strange nature. He was socially chained to his plough. Should I write about him?

No ... no! Too much had already been written about the poor peasant, poverty-ridden, ignorant, long-suffering. I had written about such peasants myself and portrayed them exactly like that. But now we had the Revolution. This very peasant was fighting like mad at a dozen fronts at once, hungry, cold, lice-infested, barefoot and ragged but as terrible as an infuriated bear. And he wrested victories from the enemies, too. It was not that same peasant any more.

No, I shall write about these peasants marching on in a roaring mob, mauling, like a bear, interventionists, land-owners and White generals. And again rose before me the picture of rocks, snow-capped peaks, the blue wall of the sea and the gaping gorges.

I began asking comrades who came from the fronts of the Civil War about their experiences and writing down their stories. I heard amazing things. Pictures of unexampled heroism unfolded before me, but I was still waiting for something, something special, and I did not wait in vain.

I had a Ukrainian friend in Moscow, Sokirko. One evening, when I was at his place, three people came to see him. One was blond and jolly, and I could imagine him singing lovely Ukrainian songs in a mellow voice. The other was a quiet man who smoked most of the time. The third was a really striking figure, his face as though cast of bronze, immovable and impassive.

"Well, here are some chaps from the Taman Division, they'll tell you bucketfuls, just you write it down," said Sokirko.

His wife made us some tea and we spent the entire night drinking it as they told and I listened to their incredible story. Finally, towards morning, the mistress of the house sent us packing.

"Really, what about getting some sleep? Talking away all night long, until my head can no longer stay upright. Out you go, boys!"

I walked home, my belly drawn in from hunger and my head singing with joy: the three told me about the march

of the Taman Army along the Black Sea coast, the very place which was so vivid in my memory.

It was like a revelation: "Send the risen revolutionary peasantry across those very mountain ridges. Those poor peasants really marched here and laid their heads for the revolution." Life itself prompted me: "Mould this 'Iron Flood'—it's not for nothing that you roamed those very places. And you know those peasants well, too...."

Actually, the theme of the peasants' participation in the Revolution had been ripening within me for many months.

We know from history that peasants took part in many revolutionary movements, though their actions were often not sufficiently organised and anarchic in character (Razin's, Pugachev's and later peasant uprisings in various gubernias). Such revolts could not accomplish a revolution. A socialist revolution could only become victorious when it was headed by the proletariat. A peasant uprising shook the social order but did not replace it with a new one. The Revolution broke the old system down to its foundation and replaced it with a new one.

Naturally, the proletariat remained the main motive and organising force of the Revolution, but it did not perform it alone—what it did was to arouse the vast mass of the peasantry to take up the struggle.

If the working class had been alone in the revolutionary struggle, it would have been vanquished, as it happened in previous revolutions. But the peasantry stood at its side during the October Revolution and for that reason the Revolution won.

Pre-revolutionary peasantry, in its very essence, was a class very different from the workers. The worker is forged by industrial production, he is prepared to revolutionary struggle by his entire life, so to speak, he has no private property.

The peasant, on the other hand, the kind of peasant I wanted to show in *The Iron Flood*, was a property-owner: he had a cow, a horse, a plot of land and a house. He was an owner, however small and insecure, and this made for the fundamental difference between his psychology and the worker's and determined his very different attitude to our Revolution. His life had been hard enough, but he had a very different way of reasoning: "It would be a good thing to do away with the landowner and take his land; I may also take his implements, a couple of cows, a

couple of horses and a plough, and that is all I want. With these things I shall grow rich and enlarge my farm." That is how this small property-owner reasoned. And when the Revolution broke out, part of the peasants rose with the aim of getting rid of the landowner and grabbing his possessions. The majority of them did not give a thought to what would happen afterwards and had no idea how they would go on.

How did it happen then that the peasantry, with this kind of mentality, joined the revolutionary struggle in their mass and finally organised themselves in the colossal and astounding Red Army which won victory for the proletarian revolution.

It was the objective march of history that impelled the peasants to join the workers in the Revolution. It was only on this condition that the peasants could hope to get the better hand of the landowners for good and all. For my *Iron Flood* I looked for material which would give me a chance to show the peasantry in all its manifestations.

When the three Taman soldiers told me about their march, I realised it was at last the material I had sought so long. Without any more hesitation I took the theme to my bosom, the theme of the masses of poor peasantry fleeing from the Kuban territory where the wealthy kulak strata rose in revolt against the October Revolution. Poor peasants and Cossacks joined the defeated units of the Red Army and marched to the south to join the Soviet troops in the North Caucasus. The peasants had no choice but to flee, for rich Cossacks massacred poor peasants who sympathised with the Soviets. But the flight was disorderly in the extreme. The peasant mass was muddled and disorganised and refused to obey the orders of commanders they had elected themselves.

The march entailed so much suffering and losses, it was such a nightmarish university, that by the end of it, the people changed out of all recognition: naked, barefoot, starving, exhausted they had fused into a terrible force that swept all obstacles in its way and won victory. And after they had gone through this agony, blood, despair and tears, their eyes were opened. Then they realised that Soviet power was their only salvation. It might not have been conscious knowledge, as with the proletariat, but it was instinctive conviction.

I seized at the Taman soldiers story about their inimitable march because, to my mind, this march showed the

transformation of peasant mentality. According to their story, at the beginning it was a loose, anarchist-minded mass of small owners. At the cost of inhuman strain, at the cost of a bitter fight and appalling losses, the mass was transformed and by the end of the march it had become that revolutionary mass, that revolutionary peasantry which became a staunch ally of the workers.

This was what I wanted, for my *Iron Flood*.

I must note here that the Taman mass did not stop at the point where I finished my narration, but went on to Astrakhan. Why did I put the fullstop earlier? Because my task had been fulfilled. I took anarchist mass which refused to obey and was prepared to bayonet its leaders if they displeased them and led them through terrible torments to the point when they realised they were a part of an organised force of the October Revolution. That was enough for me. My task had been achieved.

Alexander Serafimovich

THE IRON FLOOD

Dense clouds of hot dust enveloped the Cossack village, smothering its huts and orchards, its streets and wattle fences, leaving visible only the sharp, dark tops of the tapering poplars.

From all sides came the din of voices, the barking of dogs and neighing of horses, the ring and rattle of metal, the crying of children, the rough swearing of men, calls of women, and the raucous, drunken singing to the accompaniment of an accordion. As though a huge beehive had lost its queen and was humming in frenzied distraction, many-voiced and discordant.

This swirling haze, dusty and sultry, swallowed the steppe to the very windmills on the old Scythian gravemound; and there, too, reigned the same unceasing tumult of a thousand-voiced multitude.

Only the river, foaming with cold mountain waters past the village, baffled the clouds of stifling dust. Beyond the river the mass of blue mountains blotted out half the distant sky.

In the blinding brightness of the sky, kites—brown robbers of the steppe—soared inquisitively above the commotion turning their hooked beaks to right and to left, but making nothing of it, for never before had there been such a sight.

Was it a country fair? Where, then, were the tents and traders with their heaped merchandise?

Was it a settlers' camp? But why the guns and limberchests, the army carts and the stacked rifles?

Was it an army?

But why were there babies crying all over the place, napkins hung upon rifles to dry and cradles swung suspended from the muzzles of guns; why did young mothers suckle their babies, cows munch hay beside the artillery horses; women and girls with tanned faces fix

kettles of millet and suet over the reeky and pungent *kizyak** fires? Confusion, dimness, dust, disorder; a tumult and a din of voices.

In the village itself there were only Cossack wives together with the old women and children. Not one Cossack had remained. They had all vanished as if the earth had swallowed them. And the Cossack women, peering out through their cottage windows on the Sodom and Gomorrah which ran wild in the dust-choked streets and narrow lanes, hissed:

"A curse on your brazen eyes!"

II

Above the lowing of cows, the crowing of cocks, the general hubbub, the voices of the steppe people rang out, some hoarse, others sonorous and vibrant:

"Hey, fellows ... hurry up!"

"Come to the meeting, comrades!"

"Over by the windmills!"

As the sun gradually cooled, the hot dust settled and the poplars appeared in all their towering grandeur. As far as the eye could see orchards emerged and huts loomed white; the village streets and lanes were blocked from end to end with carts, gigs and arabas, limber-chests, horses and cows which crowded into the orchards, flooding the steppe to the very windmills that pointed in all directions with their long, webbed fingers.

And from around the windmills, with a swelling din of voices, a sea of people spread out, their bronze faces bobbing as far as the eye could see; old men with grizzled beards, women with worn faces, young girls with merry eyes, boys darting to and fro, panting dogs with tongues lolling, all those were drowned in the surging mass of soldiers—soldiers in high, shaggy sheepskin hats, crumpled peaked caps, Caucasian felt hats with sagging brims; soldiers in ragged tunics, faded print shirts, Circassian coats, some stripped to the waist, with cartridge belts slung crosswise over their bronzed and muscular bodies, darkly burnished bayonets bristling above the heads....

The windmills, black with age, stared in amazement: never before had there been such a sight.

On the mound, by the windmills, the regimental,

**Kizyak*—dried dung used as fuel.—Tr.

battalion and company commanders and chiefs of staff gathered. Who are these? Tsarist officers who had risen from the ranks, barbers, coopers, carpenters, sailors, fishermen from towns and Cossack villages. They were all chiefs of small Red detachments which they had mustered from their own villages, hamlets, streets or settlements. There was also among them a sprinkling of regular officers who had gone over to the Revolution.

Vorobyov, the regimental commander, broad-shouldered and with a moustache half a foot long, climbed upon the creaky turning-beam of one of the windmills and raised his powerful voice:

"Comrades!"

But his roar seemed puny and insignificant before the thousands of bronzed faces, the thousands of eyes staring at him. The commanding staff clustered around him.

"Comrades!"

"Go to hell!"

"Down with him!"

"We don't want you!"

"What sort of commander are you? Go to your... mother!"

"Didn't you once wear shoulder-straps, you traitor?!"

"He's cut them off long ago."

"What are you barking about?"

"Bash him to hell!"

Over the sea of faces rose a forest of clenched fists. It was impossible to make out what the crowd was shouting.

Close to the windmill stood a short, stocky man, with square, hard-set jaws. He seemed to be made of lead. His small, grey, gimlet eyes glittered under his low brows as he surveyed the scene, missing nothing. His squat shadow lay on the ground, the shadow of his head trampled by the feet of his neighbours.

The long-moustached fellow, standing on the beam, again lifted his voice:

"Wait—listen! We have to talk over the situation...."

"To hell with you and your—talk!"

His voice was drowned in the tumult of oaths.

A woman thrust up her long, bony arm, sun-scorched and toil-worn, amid the tangle of threatening fists; her piercing voice rose above the others as she screamed:

"Stop your croaking! We won't listen. You horse dung! Ah! I had a cow and two pairs of oxen, a cottage and a samovar ... where are they now?"

Again the crowd became frenzied, everybody shouting, nobody listening.

"I'd have bread now if I'd had the chance to gather the harvest."

"They said we must push on towards Rostov."

"Where are the tunics you promised, the foot-cloths and boots?"

The man on the beam shouted:

"Why did you all come flocking along? If you had —"

The crowd roared explosively.

"Because of you, you bloody swine! You led us away! Had we all stayed at home our barns would have been full; now we roam the steppe, like a lot of homeless dogs...."

"You've led us into a trap!" the soldiers roared, their dark bayonets swaying.

"Where are we going now?!"

"To Ekaterinodar."

"But the Cadets are there!"

"There's nowhere to go."

The man by the windmill with the iron jaws and grey gimlet eyes stood motionless.

An ominous cry burst from the crowd.

"We're betrayed!"

The cry was caught up and spread far back among the carts, cradles, horses, camp-fires, limber-chests, and even those who could not make out the word divined its meaning. A shudder ran through the crowd; it began to breathe heavily. Suddenly the hysterical wail of a woman pierced the air. But no woman had vented it; it came from a little beak-nosed soldier who was stripped to the waist and shod in big, oversized top-boots.

"They sell us like stinking cattle!"

A man with a strikingly handsome face and a budding black moustache, head and shoulders taller than the rest, wearing a sailor's cap with two ribbons fluttering behind his long sunburnt neck, elbowed his way through the crowd. He kept his eyes fixed on the group of commanders and tightly gripped his fiercely gleaming rifle.

"We've had it," the commander thought.

The man with the iron jaws clenched them still more firmly. But there was anxiety in the look he cast over the tumultuous human sea, at the black, howling mouths, the dark-red faces, the threatening eyes glowering beneath the lowered brows.

"Where is missus?" the man thought.

The man in the sailor's cap with the fluttering ribbons was now quite near, tightly gripping his rifle and steadily staring as if he were afraid of losing sight of his target, working his elbows as he pushed his way through the dense crowd which, swaying as it shouted, held him in a vice-like grip.

The man with the iron jaws felt particularly bitter; he had fought shoulder to shoulder with them as a machine-gunner on the Turkish front. An ocean of blood ... thousands of deaths ... those last months together they had fought the Cadets, Cossacks, generals in Eisk, Tem-ryuk, on the Taman Peninsula and in the Kuban villages.

He unlocked his jaws and spoke in a strong, calm voice which dominated the hubbub and was heard by all:

"You know me, comrades. We shed our blood together. You yourselves made me your commander. But now, if you go on like this, we shall all be done for. Cossacks and Cadets are pressing upon us from every direction. Each hour counts."

He spoke with the Ukrainian drawl, which disposed the crowd towards him.

"You wore shoulder-straps!" shrieked the little, half-naked soldier.

"Did I ask for them? You know I fought at the front and the officers shoved them on to me. You know I belong where you belong. Haven't I endured poverty, bent my back under the load of toil, strained like an ox? Haven't I ploughed and sown with you?"

"That's true!" The words resounded in the wavering din. "He's one of us!"

The tall man in the sailor's cap had pushed himself through the crowd at last. He leaped forward, still with those staring eyes, and without a word swung back his bayonet for the lunge with all his strength, knocking someone behind him with the butt end of his rifle. The man with the iron jaws made no attempt to avoid the blow aimed at him. A shudder that was half a smile ripped his face, which had suddenly become bloodless, the skin resembling yellow leather.

But the little, naked soldier had quickly bent his head like a bullock and flung himself against the sailor, striking him under the elbow with his shoulder and shouting:

"None of that, you fool!"

Jerked aside, the bayonet missed the man with the iron jaws and ran to its socket into the belly of a young battalion commander alongside. He gasped hoarsely with

the hiss of escaping steam and lurched over on his back. The tall man made furious attempts to withdraw his bayonet, the point of which had stuck in the spinal column of his victim.

The company commander, a young man with a hairless girlish face, grasped an arm of the windmill and tried to scramble up, but with a creak it swung down and he found himself again on the ground. The others, with the exception of the man with the square jaws, whipped out their revolvers, despair on their pale, convulsed faces.

Other staring, wild-eyed men, tightly gripping their rifles, began to push their way out of the crowd towards the windmills.

"Dogs ... dogs they are ... as dogs they'll die!"

"Kill 'em ... leave none alive to breed their kind!..."

Suddenly the uproar ceased. All heads turned, all eyes looked in one direction.

Across the steppe a black horse galloped, its body stretched into a line close to the stubble. The rider, in a red-dappled shirt, lay with his face in the horse's mane, his arms hanging loosely on either side. The horse approached swiftly, straining desperately, mad with fear, leaving behind it clouds of dust. Clots of white foam flecked its black chest, its sweating, heaving sides. The rider, his head still against the mane, swayed to the rhythm of the clattering hooves.

Then another dark spot appeared in the steppe.

A murmur ran through the crowd:

"Look! There's another!"

"He's coming hell for leather...."

The black horse galloping towards them, snorting and shedding flecks of white foam, suddenly halted in front of the crowd and sat back on its haunches. The rider in the red-dappled shirt slid over the horse's head like a sack of meal and, flopping with a hollow thump upon the earth, lay there with his arms outstretched and his head at an unnatural angle.

Several ran from the crowd towards the fallen man, others made for the rearing horse whose black flanks glistened with bloody smears.

"It's Okhrim!" they cried as they reached him. Tenderly they handled the dead man. A long sword wound gaped in his chest and shoulder, and in his back was a small black spot of clotted blood.

A chill apprehension seized them; it spread behind the windmills, among the carts, along the streets and lanes.

"The Cossacks have cut Okhrim to pieces!"

"Woe to us!"

"Which Okhrim?"

"You know him ... the Okhrim who lives in Pavlovskaya, in the hut above the ravine...."

The other horseman galloped up. He was bespattered with blood—his face, his hands, his sweat-soaked shirt, his trousers and bare feet. Whose blood? Wide-eyed, he leapt from his staggering horse and flung himself towards the prostrate man whose face had the waxy translucence of death and over whose eyes the flies were already crawling.

"Okhrim!"

He knelt quickly and put his ear to the bloody chest of the dead man. Then he rose to his feet and stood over the body, his head bowed.

"My son ... my son!"

A muffled hollow murmur came from the crowd:

"He's dead.... Dead...."

For a while the man did not move. Then, suddenly, he cried aloud in a voice which, although hoarse from exposure, carried to the farthest cottage and amongst the carts:

"Slavyanskaya village has revolted, and so have Poltavskaya, Petrovskaya and Stiblievskaya villages. They have built gallows in the squares before the churches, and they hang everybody they can catch. Cadets have come to Stiblievskaya village, stabbing, shooting, hanging, drowning men in the Kuban. The Cossacks have no mercy for aliens ... neither for old men nor women. They treat all alike, declaring them Bolsheviks. Old Opanas who grew melons and whose house stands opposite Yavdokha Pereperechitsa's cottage—"

"We know him," the crowd shouted.

"...Old Opanas begged for mercy, crawled on his knees, but they strung him up. And they have plenty of arms. The Cossack women and children dig in the orchards and vegetable gardens, hauling out rifles and machine-guns; from the hayricks they bring out boxes of ammunition and cartridges ... hoarded war supplies from the Turkish front. There's no end to what they had hidden. Heavy guns, too. They've run amuck. All of Kuban is in flames. They torture those of us who are in the army, hang us on

trees. Some of our detachments are fighting their way through to Ekaterinodar, others to the sea, or to Rostov, but they are all hacked down by Cossack swords...."

He was silent again and stood with his head bowed over the body of his son. And in the stillness all eyes were turned upon him.

He swayed, fumbled with his hands; then he seized the bridle of his horse and made to mount it. The beast's sweaty flanks were still heaving heavily, its bloody nostrils distending with spasmodic breathing.

"Hey, Pavlo, you're mad! Where are you going...?"

"Stop! Come back, Pavlo!"

"Hold him!"

But Pavlo lashed his horse, which laid back its ears and with outstretched neck went off at full gallop; the long and slanting shadows of the windmills seemed to chase him over the wide expanse of the steppe.

"He's going to his death ... uselessly!"

"But his family's over there ... here, his son lies dead."

The man with the iron jaws said with slow deliberation:

"Did you see that?"

The crowd answered grimly:

"We're not blind."

"Heard what he said?"

And as grimly as before they answered:

"We have heard."

The iron jaws went on, grinding like millstones:

"Comrades, now we have nowhere to go. Death awaits us, before us, behind us. Those there"—he nodded towards the now rose-tinted Cossack cottages, the boundless orchards, the tall poplars that cast long slanting shadows—"those there may, perhaps, think to cut our throats tonight. Yet we have no sentry, not a single look-out, nobody in command. We must retreat. But where to...? First of all, we must reorganise the army. We must elect commanders. But this time it must be for good and all. Whoever we elect must have the power of life and death over us. There must be iron discipline. That alone can save us. We'll fight our way to our main forces. Then a helping hand can be stretched out to us from Russia. Do you agree...?"

"We agree!" The cry of assent burst out over the steppe, swelling up from among the carts in the streets and by-lanes, from the orchards and through the village to the very outskirts by the river.

"Good. Let us elect at once. After that we'll reorganise all our units. The baggage train must be separated from the fighting units. Commanders must be appointed to each unit."

"Right!" The word rolled over the boundless yellow steppe.

The slightly hoarse voice of a staid, bearded man who stood in the front row rose above the general clamour.

"But where shall we go and what good will come of it? We're ruined now. We have abandoned everything, our cattle, our farms...."

It was like a stone flung into a pond. The crowd swayed, rocked, and murmurs began to run like water rippling in circles.

"And where would you go? Back on your tracks? Do you want us all to be killed?"

The staid, bearded man answered:

"Why should they kill us if we go to them of our own accord and give up our weapons? They are not wild beasts. The Morkushinsky peasants have surrendered, the whole fifty of them; they surrendered their arms, rifles and cartridges. The Cossacks did not harm a hair of their heads. Today those peasants are ploughing."

"But they were kulaks!"

They turned upon him with flushed, angry faces, shaking their fists and shouting abuse.

"You son of a bitch!"

"The dirty dogs would hang us just the same."

"Who should we plough for?!" shrieked the women.

"For Cossacks and officers?"

"Do you want to be a slave again?"

"He wants us to be lashed by the Cossacks. He wants us to serve officers and generals!"

"Clear off, you traitor, while you're alive!"

"Beat him up! He'd sell his own kith and kin."

The bearded man went on:

"Listen to me, instead of barking like dogs...."

"Shut your mouth, windbag!"

Flushed, angry faces turned to one another; eyes flashed, fists were shaken. A blow was struck. Someone was being chased to the village....

"Silence, citizens!"

"Stop that.... Where are you dragging me? Let go! I'm not a sheaf of wheat to be dragged about."

The man with the iron jaws intervened.

"Comrades, that's enough. Let him go. We must set to work. We have got to elect a commander. Then he must appoint his staff. Who's your choice?"

For a moment there was utter silence. The steppe, the village, the boundless crowd—all stood still. Then a forest of horny hands went up and a name was spoken. It went like thunder over the steppe, through the village with its endless orchards, beyond the river.

"Ko-zh-ukh!"

The echo in the blue mountains caught it up.

"Uk-ukh!"

Kozhukh shut his iron jaws with a snap and saluted, the muscles of his face working. He approached the two dead bodies and took off his dirty straw hat. Following his action, the crowd bared their heads. The women began to weep. Kozhukh stood for a moment with his head bowed.

"Let us bury our comrades with honour. Take them up."

Two army coats were laid on the ground. The tall handsome youth wearing the sailor's cap with fluttering ribbons approached the body of the battalion commander on whose tunic a wide bloody stain had congealed; silently he bent over him and very carefully, as if afraid of hurting him, lifted him in his arms. Others lifted Okhrim from the ground and the two bodies were borne away.

The crowd opened, giving place to their dead, and then closed again and streamed after them in an endless procession with bared heads, followed by their own long and slanting shadows, which were trampled by those that marched behind.

A youthful and mellow voice intoned sorrowfully:

Our brothers have fallen in desperate fight....

Other voices joined in, rough and untrained, out of time and tune, disconnecting and distorting the words. Louder resounded the discordant.

Sad victims of tyranny cruel....

Disjointed and dissonant, it nevertheless impressed one with a sadness which was in harmony with the forlornness of the dreamy steppe, the old blackened windmills, the tall poplars, now delicately touched with gold, the white huts with their orchards by which the procession was passing, carrying their dead as if this were the country of

their birth, dear and familiar, the place where they had lived and would die.

The blue of the mountains deepened.

Granny Gorpina, the woman who had raised her bony arm in the forest of hands, was mopping with the hem of her shabby skirt her streaming red eyes and her face, in every wrinkle of which the dust had plastered. Shaken with sobs, she crossed herself repeatedly, murmuring:

"Holy Lord, immortal and strong, have mercy upon us.... Holy Lord, immortal and strong...."

And in her emotion every now and then she blew her nose in her skirt.

The soldiers marched with a swinging gait, solemnly, with knit brows, the neat dark rows of their bayonets swaying.

They've given their all for the people they loved....

The light dust, which had settled with the early evening, rose again in slowly drifting clouds and obliterated all around.

One could now see nothing, could only hear the beat of feet and

... in terrible dungeons you languished for years....

The dark, massed mountains, in their funeral night attire, hid from sight the first timid stars.

Wooden crosses. Some had fallen, others tilted. The empty steppe, overgrown with scrub, spread indefinitely. An owl flew by silently. Bats flitted hither and thither. Now and then the gleam of marble with gold lettering showed in the evening dusk, revealing the tombs of prosperous Cossacks and merchants, memorials of shrewd, acquisitive lives, of customs that had seemed hard and fast. By these tombs the procession streamed singing:

The tyrants shall fall, and the people shall rise....

Side by side two graves were dug. Fresh, fragrant boards were hastily knocked together for coffins. In them the dead bodies were laid.

Kozhukh ascended the heap of freshly shovelled earth and bared his head.

"Comrades, our comrades are dead, and we must honour them. They died for us. Yes. This is what I want to say. What did they die for? Comrades, Soviet Russia is

not dead. It will live till the end of time. Comrades, we are in a trap here. Yonder is Soviet Russia and Moscow. Russia will win in the end. Russia, where the workers and peasants have the power. That power will settle everything. We are being attacked by the Cadets, that is, by the generals and landlords, by the capitalists, blood-suckers and scoundrels. To hell with them, we shan't give in! We'll show them our mettle! Comrades, let us throw earth on the coffins of our comrades and swear by their graves to support the power of the Soviets...."

The coffins were lowered. Granny Gorpina, pressing her hand against her mouth, burst into tears, uttering now and then little cries that sounded like the whining of a puppy. Another woman and then another also began to sob. The cemetery was filled with the voices and lamentations of women, who pushed forward and bent over the graves, scooping up earth and throwing it in.

There was the dry rustle of earth.

A man whispered into Kozhukh's ear:

"How many cartridges shall I give them?"

"A dozen."

"That's not much!"

"We are short of cartridges. We must be sparing with them."

A thin volley was fired ... a second ... a third ... the flashes lit up for an instant the wooden crosses, the quickly moving spades, the dark faces.... Silence ensued, merging into the hush of the falling night, heavy with the smell of warm dust and filled with the continuous murmur of water which lulled them as in a dream, reminiscent of something indefinable ... and beyond the river, the heavy zigzags of the now black mountains lay across the dark sky.

III

The small black windows stared into the darkness; there was something sinister in their aloofness.

The tin lamp set on a stool sent quivering coils of black smoke to the ceiling. The air was thick with tobacco smoke. Over the floor was spread a carpet of fantastic design of lines, green and blue stains, black patterns and numberless marks—in fact, a huge map of the Caucasus.

The commanding staff, in beltless shirts, crawled barefoot over it cautiously on all fours, absorbed in their

study of the map. Those who smoked were careful to avoid dropping ashes upon it. Kozhukh, his jaws set, a far-away look in his clear, gimlet eyes, squatted there silently in deep thought. Blue tobacco smoke enveloped the whole group.

Through the black windows came the unremitting and threatening murmur of the river, a sound of which one was not aware by day.

Although the owners had been ejected from this and the neighbouring cottages, the men spoke in cautious half-whispers.

"We're done for here. No order is obeyed. Don't you see?"

"You can't do anything with the soldiers."

"Then they'll perish, too—the Cossacks will cut them to pieces."

"They won't move before disaster comes."

"It's damned well come already. The whole neighbourhood's afire."

"But you can't make them see it."

"We must occupy Novorossiisk and wait."

"There can't be any question of Novorossiisk," said a clean-shaven man in a well-laundered shirt. "I have a report from Comrade Skornyak. It's a hell of a mess there: Germans, Turks, Mensheviks, Socialist-Revolutionaries, Cadets, and our Revolutionary Committee ... all hold meetings, all discuss and wrangle, call endless conferences, work out thousands of plans to save the situation, and it's all useless talk. To take the army there would hasten its ruin."

A distant pistol shot was heard through the grumbling of the river. The sound was distinct but faint. The dark little windows seemed to say with their black alertness, "It's begun."

Those in the room strained their ears to the utmost, but continued outwardly unconcerned, drawing at their cigarettes and following with their fingers the lines of the thoroughly studied map.

Notwithstanding the intentness with which they studied the map, they could alter nothing: to the left the blue patch of the sea was like a gateless wall; higher up and to the right was a jumble of hostile villages; lower down to the south the way was barred by reddish chains of impassable mountains; they were in a trap.

There, on the map, was the turbulent, winding river. They could hear its grumble come through the little black

windows. On its banks sprawled their huge camp. In the ravines, reedy marshes, forests, steppes, in all the farmsteads and villages shown on the map, Cossacks were prowling. Hitherto, uprisings in the separate villages had been more or less successfully suppressed. But now the flames of revolt had enveloped the whole of the vast Kuban. The Soviet power had been swept away; its representatives in the villages had been done to death, and the gallows stood as thick as gravestones in a cemetery. Every Bolshevik—most of whom were “aliens”—was hanged. True, some of them had been local Cossacks. But all, without distinction, had been hanged. Where could one retreat? Where could one find safety?

“It’s obvious that we must make for Tikhoretskaya, from there to Svyatoi Krest, and from there we’ll get into Russia.”

“Svyatoi Krest, you blockhead! How will you reach it through the rebel Kuban, without cartridges or shells?”

“We must join our main forces.”

“But where are our main forces? If you’ve had a message, say so.”

“My firm opinion is that we should occupy Novorossiisk, and then wait there for reinforcements from Russia.”

Underlying the words of each was the implication that had he been entrusted with the command he would have worked out a sure plan for saving everyone.

Another distant sinister shot was heard above the rumble of the river; then followed two shots, then one again, and suddenly, a whole burst of them, followed by silence.

All turned their heads to the little black windows. A cock crowed from behind a nearby wall or from the attic.

“Comrade Prikhodko,” said Kozhukh, “go and see what’s happening.”

A sparely built young Kuban Cossack with a good-looking, slightly pock-marked face, his narrow waist tightly belted over his long Caucasian coat, went out cautiously on his bare feet.

“What I say is—”

“Pardon me, comrade,” cut in the clean-shaven man. He was standing, looking down calmly on the other commanders, all of them soldiers of peasant origin, coopers, carpenters, barbers, and the like, who had risen from the ranks during the war, whereas he had had

military training and was an old revolutionary. "It's impossible to lead troops reduced to the state ours are in. It will end in disaster. They are not troops but gangs, continually holding meetings. It's imperative to reorganise them. Besides, all these thousands of refugee carts bind us hand and foot. They must be separated from the army—let them go where they like, return to their homes, anywhere ... but the army must be free and untrammelled. Therefore, I propose that we draft an ordinance to say we are stopping in this village for two days for the purpose of reorganisation."

Underlying his words was the thought:

"I possess wide knowledge, I can combine theory with practice, I have studied military matters from an historical angle. Why should it be him, not me?... The crowd is blind, always a crowd...."

"What are you talking about?" said Kozhukh in a rusty voice. "Each soldier has relatives in the baggage train, either his mother, father, sweetheart, or whole family. D'you think he'll leave them? If we stay here and wait we'll all die by the Cossack swords. We must go on and on. We shall reorganise on the march. We must pass the town quickly without stopping and keep to the coast. We'll reach Tuapse, follow the highroad across the mountains and rejoin our main forces. They can't have gone far. Each day here death comes closer."

Then all spoke at once, each offering a plan which seemed brilliant to himself and futile to the rest of them.

Kozhukh rose to his feet. The muscles of his face worked as he glanced piercingly at his audience, with steely eyes.

"We march tomorrow ... at dawn," he said.

But behind his decision was the thought: they won't obey, the devils!

They became silent and their silence said:

"Nothing can be stupider."

IV

Alexei Prikhodko stepped out of the hut into the darkness which resounded with the roar of the river. At the door stood a black, stubby machine-gun. Beside it were two black figures with fixed bayonets.

Prikhodko moved on, peering around. The sky was blanketed by invisible clouds. From afar came the tireless

barking of dogs. They would fall silent for a while, as if listening to the noise of the river, and then start anew, obstinately, exasperatingly.

The cottages loomed mysteriously, dimly white. The streets were black with cumbrous shapes. If you looked intently at them they turned out to be carts, from which came sounds of snoring and heavy breathing. Prostrate forms lay everywhere. A dark poplar seemed to tower in the middle of the street, or a church steeple—but it was only the raised shaft of some cart. Horses munched in a measured, lazy fashion; the cows sighed heavily.

Alexei stepped over the sleepers cautiously, seeing his way by the glow of his cigarette. All was quiet and peaceful. Nevertheless, he felt tensely expectant. Maybe he awaited another distant rifle shot ... maybe two shots in quick succession...?

"Who's there?"

"A friend."

"Who's there ... devil take you!"

Two hardly discernible bayonets were thrust forward.

"Company commander," he said and then bending forward he whispered:

"Gun-carriage."

"Correct."

"Response?"

One of the soldiers, tickling Alexei's ear with his wiry moustache, and breathing upon him a strong smell of spirits, whispered hoarsely, "Tether".

Alexei resumed his way amidst the vague cart shapes, the champing horses and heavy sleepers, the ceaseless murmur of the water and the insistent barking of dogs, carefully stepping over arms and legs. Here and there from a cart he heard wakeful soldiers talking with their wives and, from beneath the fences, suggestive giggles or suppressed squeaks of sweethearts.

"Drunk again, the rascals. Gulped all the Cossacks' booze, I'll bet. That's all right if they keep their heads. How is it that the Cossacks haven't slaughtered us all yet? The fools." He could discern something white nearby ... a small hut, perhaps, or a piece of white cloth. "...Not too late for them to do it now. We have about ten cartridges apiece and perhaps fifteen shells to every gun, whereas they lack nothing."

The white object stirred.

"Is that you, Anka?"

"Why are you roaming about in the night?"

A black horse was champing at hay piled up between a pair of shafts.... Alexei began to roll a fresh cigarette. The girl, steadying herself against a cart, scratched her bare leg with her toe. From a horse blanket spread under the cart came deep snoring—the girl's father was plunged in sleep.

"Are we going to stay here long?"

"No, we're moving very soon," answered Alexei, drawing at his cigarette.

Its glowing end lit up the tip of his nose, his tobacco-stained fingers; it lit up momentarily the girl's sparkling eyes, her strong neck rising above the white shirt and strings of glass beads; then darkness closed in again with the rough silhouettes of carts, the breathings of the cows, the champing of horses, and the noise of the river. Why didn't that rifle pop...?

"It would be easy to marry this girl," he thought.

And immediately, as always, he saw in his mind's eye the neck, slender and delicate as the stem of a flower, of an unknown girl, her blue eyes, her flimsy bluish frock ... graduated from high school ... not his wife but his betrothed ... a girl he had never met, a girl that must exist somewhere....

"If the Cossacks pounce upon us, I'll stab myself through the heart."

She plunged her hand into her bosom and produced a dimly glittering object.

"It's sharp ... you try it...."

Ti-li-li-li.

One of the strange, faint sounds of night: it pulled at your heart-strings, but it was not the cry of an infant; probably an owl.

"Well, I must be pushing on; no good wasting time here." But his feet seemed to have taken root; he could not tear himself from the spot. To compel himself to move away he began to disparage the girl:

"She's like a cow, scratching her ear with her hind foot."

But that didn't help; he remained standing there, drawing at his cigarette. And again from the darkness appeared the tip of his nose and his fingers, her strong neck with a slight hollow, glass beads, youthful breasts

giving shape to her white embroidered shirt. And then again darkness, the noise of the river, human breathing.

His face was close to her eyes. Their sparkle stung him, ran over him like needles. He caught hold of her elbow.

"Anka!"

She smelt the tobacco on him and sensed his strong, young body.

"Anka, let's go to the orchard and sit together a little."

Pressing both her hands against his chest she jerked herself away from him with such violence that he staggered back, stepping on somebody's arms and legs. Her white form whisked into the creaky cart and then came a short, challenging laugh that died quickly. Granny Gorpina raised her head from her pillow, sat upright in the cart, and began to scratch herself vigorously.

"You night bird! I wish you'd settle down to sleep, you hussy! Who's there?"

"It's me, Granny."

"Ah, Alexei! What do you want? I didn't know it was you, sonny. What's going to happen to us, my sweet? Oh, our cup will be bitter, my heart scents evil. When we started, first thing a cat ran across the road. Such a huge cat, pregnant she was. And then a rabbit scurried after her. God have mercy on us! What do the Bolsheviks think they are up to? All our property is lost. When my parents married me to my old man, my mother said, 'Here's a samovar for you, keep it as the apple of your eye for your children and grandchildren to have when you're dead.' I was thinking of giving it to Anka when she married. And now we've abandoned everything, all our cattle, too. What do the Bolsheviks think they're doing? What's the Soviet power going to do? To hell with it if my samovar is lost! 'Turn out for three days,' they said, 'and after three days everything will go back to normal again!' And here we are knocking about for a whole week, like lost souls. What kind of power is the Soviet power if it can't do anything for us? A dog's power! The Cossacks have risen, like the devils they are! My heart aches for my people, for Okhrim ... and for that young fellow.... Oh, dear Lord!"

Granny Gorpina went on scratching herself. In the pauses of her lament, the mumbling of the river filled the vastness of the night.

"Ah! Granny, no use complaining. That won't bring you luck."

He drew at his cigarette, preoccupied with his own thoughts: should he remain at the head of his company or join the staff of headquarters. Where, in these circumstances, would he meet the blue-eyed, slender-necked girl?

Granny wasn't to be quieted easily. She had behind her a long hard life that trailed after her like a shadow. She had lost two sons on the Turkish front, and now the other two were bearing arms here. Her old man was snoring under the cart and that flibbertigibbet of an Anka was now as still as a mouse ... asleep, perhaps, but who could tell? Oh, life was hard! It had strained all the sinews of her body, nigh sixty years old. And the old man, and her sons ... how they had bent their backs, toiling and toiling! Who for, she'd like to know? For the Cossacks and their generals and officers.... These had owned all the land, and the non-Cossacks were like dogs.... Oh, what a life! They had worked with their eyes fixed on the ground, like oxen. Daily, in the morning and at night, she had mentioned the tsar in her prayers—her parents first, then the tsar, then her children, and then all Christians of the orthodox faith. And he was no tsar after all, only a grey dog, so they kicked him out. Oh, what a life! She had trembled in every fibre, had been terrified when she heard the tsar had been kicked out, and then she had thought that it served him right—he was a dog, a mere dog....

"There's swarms of fleas in this beastly place."

Granny scratched herself and peered into the darkness. The river roared. She made the sign of the cross.

"It will soon be morning."

She lay down again, but sleep had abandoned her. One's past always hovered over one: you couldn't escape it. There it was, silent, as though not there at all, but it was, right enough.

"The Bolsheviks don't believe in God. Well, maybe they know what they're about. They came and overthrew everything. The officers and landowners ran away quick enough. That made the Cossacks wild. O Lord, grant the Bolsheviks strength, never mind their disbelief in heaven. After all, they're not foreigners, they're our own people. If they'd turned up sooner there wouldn't have been this accursed war and my two sons would have been alive. Now they sleep in Turkish soil.... Where did these Bolsheviks come from? Some say they were bred in Moscow, others say, in Germany: the German tsar bred

them and sent them to Russia. And when they came they cried in one voice, 'The land must belong to the people and the people must work for themselves and not for the Cossacks.' They are good men ... but why did I have to lose my samovar ... my sons ... that cat...."

Granny's mumbling faded away and ceased. She had dozed off.

Dawn was approaching.

Life is full of variety. You'd have thought doves were cooing. But why should doves coo in the night under a cart by the fence; why should they make bubbles with a tiny mouth? "Vvvva-va" and "uv-vv-va...." But it sounded delightfully sweet to somebody. And, in fact, the rich, mellow voice of a young mother also cooed:

"What is it, my precious little flower? Well, have some more. Why do you turn away? Look at the tricks he plays turning away and pushing mummy's nipple out with his tongue...."

She gave such a happy and catching laugh that light seemed to break in the darkness around. One could not see her; but one visualised her black eyebrows and the dimly glittering silver ear-rings in her small ears.

"Had enough? Is that so, Tiny One? Oh, he's in a temper! Pushes away mummy's breast with his little hands. And his nails are like tissue paper. Let me kiss every rosy finger! Tck—one and tck—there's another; then, a third tck! Oh! what big bubbles he's making. Sure he'll be a great man. And mummy will be old and toothless, and her son will say, 'Well, Granny, sit at the table and I'll give you some porridge.' Stepan, Stepan, you've slept enough! Wake up, your son is on a spree."

"Don't! Leave off. Let me be...."

"Stepan, you must wake up. Your son is on a spree! Now ... clumsy! Here, I'm putting your son at your side. Have a go at him, little son, pull his nose, and his lip. That's it ... fine! Your father hasn't yet had time to grow a beard for you to play with, so tug at his lip, tug away."

And a man's voice, sleepy at first, then joyous and suggestive of smiles, began to speak in the dark:

"There, sonny, lie here beside me. We've no time to play with women, we two serious men. We'll go to the war

together; then we'll till the good earth. Hey, what d'you think you're doing?... Want to drown your daddy?"

The young mother burst into an inexpressibly merry laugh.

Prikhodko went on, cautiously stepping over human legs, wagon shafts, horse collars, sacks. Now and then his cigarette glowed brightly as he drew at it.

Everything was quiet. Darkness reigned. Even the little family under the cart by the fence quieted down. The dogs were silent. The river rumbled on, but more sedately, as if from a distance. Sleep, the invincible, ruled the breathing of the thousands of people.

Prikhodko continued his round, no longer alert for rifle shots. His eyes were heavy. Already the rugged outline of the mountains was faintly discernible in the sky.

"It's usually at dawn that attacks begin...."

He turned back, reported to Kozhukh, then groped for a cart and scrambled into it. The cart creaked and swayed. There was something he had meant to think about—what was it, how? He closed his heavy eyes for a moment and at once fell into a deep sleep.

V

Clatter of iron, clanking, crashing, cries....

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat....

"What's up?... What's the matter? Hold on!"

What was that flaring in the sky? Was it a fire? Or the dawn?

"First company ... at the double ... quick march!"

Rooks swarmed in black clouds in the blazing sky chorusing their alarm.

They were harnessing the horses hurriedly in the morning twilight thrusting on collars, tying the shaft bows.

Refugees and the men of the baggage train got into one another's way and swore savagely.

Boom! Boom!

The harnessing went on feverishly; hubs collided, horses were whipped up, and the caravan set off at a reckless speed, wheels flying off, across the bridge; every moment carts locked together and blocked the traffic.

Rat-tat-tat-tat... boom ... boom!

A covey of ducks headed for their feeding grounds. The women wailed frantically.

Rat-tat-tat.

The artillerymen frantically hooked the traces to the limbers. A little pop-eyed soldier wearing only a short tunic ran by with bare hairy legs, trailing two rifles and crying:

"Where's my company? Where's my company?"

A bare-headed, dishevelled woman ran screaming after him:

"Vasil! Vasil! Vasil!"

Rat-tat-tat-tat ... boom!

It had begun in earnest; huge columns of smoke burst over the trees and huts at the end of the village. The cattle were bellowing.

Had the night gone? A moment ago thousands of people slumbered in the tepid darkness with the river rushing and the black mountains standing invisible on the edge of the world. Now they were rose-coloured. But they were negligible now, unheeded like the rumbling of the river which was drowned in the feverish activity, the clatter and clamour, the creaking of carts and that rolling rat-tat-tat-tat which put fear into every heart. And even this became puny and futile beside the roar of the heavy guns.

Boom-bla-a-ach!

Kozhukh sat before a hut. His sallow face was calm, as though he was at a railway station watching the bustle and hurry before the train departed and knowing that once the train pulled out everything would be quiet again, calm and commonplace. Each moment people ran to him or galloped up on foam-flecked horses with reports. His adjutant and orderlies stood beside him, awaiting commands.

As the sun rose higher the rifle and machine-gun fire became more intense. To all reports he gave one answer:

"Don't waste your cartridges. Fire only when you must. Let the enemy approach and, when he is near enough, rush at him. On no account let him penetrate into the orchards. Detach two companies from the first regiment and recapture the windmills. Station machine-guns."

Most of the reports were alarming. But his sallow face remained stolid, save that the muscles of his jaws knotted under the leathery skin. A voice within him seemed to say

cheerfully, "That's fine, my boys ... fine!" Perhaps in an hour or less the Cossacks would break through and begin slashing with their swords. Yes, that was possible, but he saw, too, how obediently, how promptly, all his orders were carried out, how valorously the battalions and companies were fighting, those very companies which yesterday had been more like a mob of anarchists, who roared songs, who didn't give a damn for their commanders, who busied themselves only with drinking and women; he saw with what precision the commanders were executing his orders, the same commanders who had been unanimous in their contempt of him last night.

A soldier whom the Cossacks had taken prisoner and then set free was brought to him. The soldier's ears, nose, tongue, and fingers had been cut off, and on his chest was written in blood:

"This is how we shall treat all you Bolshevik swine!"

"That's fine, my boys ... fine!" the voice within Kozhukh seemed to repeat.

The Cossacks attacked furiously.

Then a breathless messenger from the rear reported:

"They're fighting at the bridge ... the baggage train and the refugees...."

Kozhukh's tanned face went as yellow as a lemon. He hurried to the spot. It was pandemonium. In a frenzied congestion at the approach to the bridge people were hacking with axes at the wheels of one another's carts, falling upon each other with poles and whips; roars, imprecations, shrieks, the dirge-like wailing of women, the screaming of infants; the bridge itself was blocked with carts locked together; snorting horses, which tore their traces; trapped people and children yelling in terror, unable to go either back or forward. And from behind the orchards came the menacing rat-tat-tat-tat.

"S-t-o-p! ... Stop!" roared Kozhukh in a voice that grated like iron. But he could not hear his own voice. He shot the nearest horse in the ear. The peasants turned upon him savagely with their poles.

"You devil's bastard! Kill our horses, would you! Bash him, kill him!"

Kozhukh with his adjutant and two soldiers retreated to the river, poles swishing through the air above their heads.

"Bring a machine-gun," he ordered hoarsely.

His aide slipped like an eel under carts and the bellies of horses. Presently a machine-gun and a platoon of soldiers came running up.

The peasants roared like wounded bulls.

"Go for them!" they cried, attacking viciously with their poles, trying to knock the rifles from the hands of the soldiers who, unable to shoot at their own people—their fathers, mothers, and wives—began to use their butt ends to good purpose.

Kozhukh, agile as a cat, leapt to the machine-gun, adjusted it, and fired several bursts over the mob. The bullets whizzed low, and the wind of death made the peasants' hair stand on end. They fell back. And from behind the orchards: rat-tat-tat-tat.

Kozhukh left the gun and began to curse the peasants at the top of his voice. They submitted to his authority. Some carts were inextricably locked together on the bridge; he ordered them to be thrown into the river. They obeyed. The bridge was cleared. He posted a platoon of soldiers at the approach to the bridge and the aide began sending the carts across in some semblance of order.

They raced over the bridge, three abreast, with the cows tied behind, skipping and tossing their heads; pigs, squealing and straining on their leads, broke into a panicky gallop; the planks of the bridge rose and fell, clattering like the keyboard of a stringless piano; the hullabaloo of it all drowned the roar of the river, the turbulent waters of which flashed blindingly under the high sun.

Over the bridge and beyond the river the baggage carts hurried, smothered in clouds of dust. The squares, streets, and lanes of the village gradually emptied till the place began to look abandoned.

The Cossacks surrounded the village in a wide, fire-spitting semi-circle both ends of which rested on the river. Steadily they pressed on, drawing closer to the village orchards and to the baggage train which continuously rattled over the bridge. The soldiers fought resolutely, defending every foot of land, defending their children, fathers, mothers. They used their cartridges sparingly, but each shot they fired made orphans of Cossack children and brought sorrow to a Cossack family.

The Cossacks pushed forward savagely, reaching the orchards, appearing from behind trees, fences, bushes.

The two lines were now separated by no more than a dozen steps. The soldiers, saving their cartridges stopped firing; they lay under cover watching the Cossacks and being watched by them; sniffing the air, they recognised the odour of vodka which was wafted over to them from the Cossack lines.

"They've got booze, the dirty dogs! Wish we'd capture some."

Suddenly a voice in which joyful excitement mingled with beastly hatred burst from the Cossack lines:

"Look there, if that's not Khomka!"

A string of lusty oaths followed.

And from behind a tree, in utter disregard of caution, stepped a young Cossack, his eyes staring wide with surprise. His exact counterpart crawled out from the soldiers' ranks.

"So it's you, Vanka!" the young soldier cried, with as good an admixture of curses.

They belonged to the same village and street. Their huts stood door to door under big willows. In the morning, when the cows were taken to pasture, their mothers met by the fence and gossiped. It was but a few years since they had been small boys, galloping together along the lanes astride sticks, catching crawfish in the sparkling Kuban River, bathing endlessly together. They had sung the delightful Ukrainian songs with the girls. Then they had been mobilised together, and under a hail of exploding shells had desperately fought the Turks.

And now?...

Now one of them cried:

"What are you doing there, you dirty rat? Why have you joined the Bolsheviks, you bare-assed bandit?"

"I'm a bandit, am I, you bastard? Your father was a rotten kulak, used to flay our people alive, and you are a filthy louse, too."

"I'm a louse, am I, you...!"

Flinging down his rifle he rushed forward with clenched fists and landed a mighty punch on Khomka's nose. Khomka swung his arm savagely and sealed one of Vanka's eyes.

"Ugh ... son of a bitch! Take that...!"

They started walloping each other in good earnest.

The Cossacks roared and hurled themselves forward with clenched fists and bestial eyes, their breath stinking with vodka. The soldiers, catching the infection of the

fury, discarded their rifles and, jumping from cover, met them fist for fist, just as if they had never set eyes on fire-arms....

And, what a fight! Bashed faces, broken noses, heavy punches on the throat, on the jaw, crunching bones, gasping, grunting, roaring vile curses ... a mass of punching, struggling, interlocked men.

The Cossack officers and the commanders of the soldiers, hoarse from shouting curses, ran hither and thither with revolvers in their hands in vain attempts to separate the fighters and make them take up their rifles again; the officers dared not shoot into the heaving mass of their own and alien men. The air was thick with the stale smell of vodka.

"Drunken dogs!" bawled the soldiers. "You need more than vodka to beat us!"

"Peasant swine! Vodka's too good for you!" yelled the Cossacks, with filthy allusions to the soldiers' parentage.

And they pounced upon one another. Noses were squashed and jaws shattered with hammering, tireless fists. Their red-hot, mutually savage hatred would brook nothing between them and their foes; they exulted in the possibility of kneading, throttling, punching, in the feel of flesh under their fists, a squashed, bleeding face.... They yelled obscenities, their breath reeking of home-brew.

Like wild cats they fought, hour after hour, hammering, pulping, choking, screaming curses. Darkness took them unawares.

Two soldiers, writhing together, groaning and swearing, slackened their grip for a moment and each peered into the face of his adversary.

"Is that you, Opanas! Why the hell are you hitting me?"

"Christ, Mikolka! I thought you were a Cossack. You've bashed my face in, you damned lunatic!"

Mopping their bleeding faces and swearing in disgust they both went back to cover and began to hunt for their rifles.

Near them two Cossacks, swearing and muttering, had fought like devils, alternatively sitting on each other's backs. Finally they caught sight of each other's faces.

"What the hell you doing ... riding on me like I was a gelding?"

"I didn't know it was you, Garaska! Why didn't you speak up? I took you for a soldier the way you swore!"

They, too, mopped their faces and retired to the Cossack rear. At last the cursing died out, and one could again hear the rushing river and the drumming of the planks of the bridge under the endless passage of the carts. Overhead the dark edges of the clouds were shot with faint crimson from the western sky. The soldiers lay in lines along the orchards; outside, in the steppe, circled the Cossack lines. All were silent and sore, bandaging swollen faces.

The rumbling on the bridge and the tumult of the water continued. The village was cleared before dawn. When the last squadron had passed over its resounding planks, the bridge was sent up in flames. From the village volleys of rifle and machine-gun fire were poured after the disappearing soldiers.

VI

Along the village streets the Cossack infantry marched, swinging the skirts of their long, tightly belted Circassian coats and singing. Their shaggy, black sheepskin caps were decked with white ribbons. Their faces were extraordinary; one had a purple swelling where his eye should be; his neighbour's nose was a raw and bleeding lump, another had an enormous cheek and unsightly swollen lips. Not a face among them was undamaged or unbruised.

Nevertheless, they trooped along merrily, kicking up eddies of dust with their sturdy feet and singing in time with their steps.

*They said they would not take it
And in revolt they rose....*

Their rich, sonorous voices rang through the village and orchards, beyond the orchards, soaring over the steppe.

They lost their mother-country....

Cossack women ran out to meet them, each looking for her man and joyously rushing to him or, suddenly, wringing her hands, drowning the song in shrieks. Here and there an old mother fell in a fit, tearing her grey hair. Powerful arms lifted these up and carried them into their huts.

And in revolt they rose....

Cossack children came skipping along, crowds of them. Where on earth had they come from? Nobody had seen anything of them for days. They shouted:

"Daddy! Daddy!"

"Uncle Mikola! Uncle Mikola!"

"The Reds have eaten our bull-calf."

"I knocked out the eye of one soldier with my shotgun. He was drunk and sleeping in our orchard."

Other campers, very different from those of yesterday and welcome to the inhabitants, filled the village streets and lanes. Small, out-door cooking stoves for summer use steamed in all the yards. The Cossack women had much to do. The cows hidden in the steppe were driven back; domestic fowl appeared. Roasting and stewing was in full swing.

On the river-bank feverish activity developed; resounding axe blows drowned the rumbling of the water and sent white chips flying in all directions and flashing in the sun: the Cossacks were working feverishly on the new bridge to replace the one burnt down; over it they would rush after the enemy.

Neither was the village idle. New Cossack units were being formed. Officers walked about, note-book in hand. Clerks sat at tables set out in the streets, drawing up lists. The roll was called.

The Cossacks quietly regarded the officers as they strolled by, their golden shoulder-straps glittering in the sun. Not so long ago—six or seven months—things had been very different: in the market place, in the streets and lanes of the village, officers like these had been lying dead, their shoulder-straps torn off, their bodies chopped up like butcher's meat. Those hiding at the farmsteads, in the steppe, and the ravines, had been brought to the village and mercilessly beaten, and after that left for days dangling from trees, food for the ravens.

That was about a year ago when the great conflagration swept over all Russia to the Turkish front itself.

And who started it?...

Nobody could tell. Unknown Bolsheviks had suddenly turned up. And it had been as if a film was removed from people's eyes. They had seen all at once that which for ages they had been unable to see, but nevertheless had been keenly aware of—the generals, officers, judges, chiefs, the big army of officials, and the intolerable, ruinous military service. Each Cossack had had to equip

his sons for military service at his own expense; after buying a horse, saddle, rifle and equipment for three or four sons, he was ruined. Things were otherwise for peasants. They had gone to the wars empty-handed and had been given all they needed, equipped from head to foot. The mass of Cossacks had grown steadily poorer, dividing into layers, the well-to-do Cossacks rising to the top, gaining in strength and influence, the others gradually going under.

The tiny sun burns strongly over the vast land, which shimmers in a blaze of heat.

"There is no land as beautiful as ours," the people say.

There is a blinding sheen on the shallow sea. Small green ripples lazily lap the coast sands. The sea teems with fish.

Next to it there is another sea — an illimitable and bottomless expanse which mirrors the radiant blue sky. It sparkles intensely under the sun, making one's eyes ache. Far away on the blue horizon curl long tails of smoke — smoke from steamers which come to buy grain and carry the money to pay for it.

Mighty mountains rise in a deep-blue wall on the coast, the whiteness of primordial snow furrowed with purple wrinkles.

The boundless mountain forests, gorges and valleys, the plateaus and ridges are alive with creatures of the wild, bird and beast, even to the rare aurochs which cannot be found anywhere else.

The corroded and riddled bowels of these great mountains yield copper, silver, zinc, lead, graphite, mercury, cement. All manner of riches. Oil oozes like black blood from the earth; brooks and streams are iridescent with a delicate spreading film of oil and carry the odour of kerosene.

"No land as beautiful...."

From the mountains and the sea stretch the steppes, so vast that there seems to be no end to them.

The shiny silken wheat is endless, endless are the green hayfields, the singing reeds of the marshes. The villages, hamlets, and farmsteads make bright white patches in the endless green sea of orchards. Tall tapering poplars reach towards the sultry skies above them, and on the grave mounds that quiver in the heat the old windmills stretch out their grey wings.

Flocks of motionless, closely packed sheep dot the steppe with grey; myriads of flies and midges swarm above them.

Well-fed cattle stand knee-deep in the crystal lakes of the steppes, indolently reflected in them. Herds of horses trail to the ravines, tossing their manes.

And over all hangs the languid, insistent heat.

The heads of the horses that thrust along the roads drawing carts are protected by straw hats, else they would be stricken by the sun's deadly glare. Such incautious people as go bare-headed drop with purple faces and glazed eyes into the hot dust of the road and lie still in the tinkling, shimmering heat.

When, drawn by six or eight oxen, the heavy ploughs cut furrows in the illimitable steppe, the rich and fertile soil which the glistening shares turn seems more like black butter than earth. It looks good enough to eat. No matter how deep the shares may dig, they never reach dead clay; always they turn over the virgin black soil, the like of which is to be found nowhere else. And the fertility of it is stupendous! A playing child sticks into this earth some discarded twig; and, lo! it sprouts, it becomes a tree, crowned with waving branches! The abundant fruits born of this soil—grapes, melons, pears, apricots, tomatoes, egg-plant—are beyond compare, no fruits match the size of them, they are incredible, supernatural.

Clouds swell up over the mountain tops, loom over the steppe, burst into beneficent rain which the black earth drinks thirstily; and the crazy sun pours down and draws forth a prodigious harvest.

"There is no land as beautiful as ours!"

And who are the lords of this beautiful country?

The Kuban Cossacks are masters of this wonderful land. And they have labourers, as numerous as themselves, labourers who likewise sing Ukrainian songs and speak Ukrainian as their native tongue.

These two peoples are blood brothers—both came from the beloved Ukraine.

The Cossacks came not of their own will; Queen Catherine drove them here a hundred and fifty years ago. She dissolved the free Cossacks' state of Zaporozhye and gave them this, at that time a savage and fearsome region. Her gift brought bitterness and sorrow to the Cossacks, homesick for their Ukraine. Yellow fever crept out of the reedy bogs and sucked pitilessly at both the old and the

young. The Circassians received the unwilling newcomers with sharp daggers and unerring bullets. Day and night, thinking of their birthplace on the Dnieper, the Cossacks wept bloody tears and fought against the yellow fever, against Circassians and the savage soil whose age-old expanse, hitherto untouched by man, they even lacked the implements to till.

And now? Now:

"There is no land as beautiful as ours!"

And then all hands itched for this land brimming over with incredible riches. Driven by need, the poor and the naked trailed with their children and miserable belongings from the Kharkov, Poltava, Ekaterinoslav, and Kiev gubernias, scattered in the Cossack settlements, snapped their teeth like hungry wolves at the sight of the wonderful land.

"Damn your eyes! This land is not for you!"

These immigrants became the hired labourers of the Cossacks and were called "outsiders". The Cossacks oppressed them in every imaginable way, did not admit their children to Cossack schools, charged them exorbitantly for the land, for their huts and orchards, for the lease of fields, put upon their shoulders the burden of the expenses of the whole community, contemptuously called them "devil's souls", "Satan's offal", "filthy intruders".

Grimly resolute, the landless "outsiders" turned to every sort of craft and industry; they were resourceful, eager for knowledge and culture, hankered after schools and repaid the Cossacks in their own coin, calling them "kulaks" and "blood-suckers". Hatred and contempt between them was mutually bitter, and the tsarist government, the generals, officers, and landlords eagerly fanned the flames of this animal hostility.

A beautiful country, smouldering with hatred, contempt, malignity.

But not all Cossacks and not all "outsiders" nursed this hostile attitude. Those "outsiders" who had conquered necessity and want by dint of acumen, perseverance, and relentless toil became respectable in the eyes of the rich Cossacks. They leased Cossack mills and many rich acres of Cossack land. They had hands of their own, drawn from among the poor "outsiders", they had money in the bank and traded in grain. They were honoured by those Cossacks who lived in houses with iron roofs and whose barns were bursting with grain.

Ravens do not peck out one another's eyes.

Cossacks in long-skirted Circassian coats and with their shaggy fur caps pushed rakishly back, galloped along the village streets, the hooves of their horses scattering the deep liquid mud of March. They whopped and whistled shrilly and fired into the blue spring sky. Was it a holiday? Church bells sent their happy ringing over the villages and farmsteads. The population, both Cossacks and "outsiders", was in holiday attire; all the girls and children, all the grey old men and the toothless old women with shrunken mouths poured out into the joyous streets.

Could it be Easter? No, the people were not celebrating a church feast. This was a human feast, the first of its kind in the long ages. The first since the creation of the world.

Down with war!

Cossacks embraced one another. They embraced "outsiders". "Outsiders" embraced Cossacks. There were no longer either Cossacks or "outsiders"—all were citizens. There were no longer "kulaks" nor "devil's offal". All were citizens.

Down with war!

In February the tsar had been overthrown. Then, in October, in far-off Russia, something else had happened. What it was nobody could tell exactly, but it was something which had gone deep into every heart.

Down with war!

Deep into the heart, instinctively understood.

Regiment after regiment streamed back from the Turkish front: Cossack cavalry, battalions of Kuban Cossacks, infantry regiments of "outsiders", briskly marching, the mounted artillery rumbling; all poured back in a continuous stream to their homes in the Kuban, to the familiar villages, taking along with them their arms, supplies and equipment, their baggage trains; on their way they raided and demolished distilleries and stores, drank themselves insensible, were drowned in seas of spirits. Those who remained whole pushed on determinedly to their villages and farms.

In the Kuban the Soviet power had already been proclaimed. Into the Kuban swarmed workers from the towns and sailors from scuttled ships, who made everything clear and convincing to the population: they explained what "landlords" and "bourgeois" and "atamans" meant, how the tsarist government had sown

discord and hatred among the Cossacks and "outsiders" and among the peoples of the Caucasus. So the officers were hanged, or they were put into sacks and the sacks were thrown into the river.

It was time to plough, time to sow, and the wonderful southern sun was promising a bountiful harvest.

"Well, how shall we plough? We must divide the land, and there's no time to lose," said the "outsiders" to the Cossacks.

"You want land!" said the Cossacks with black looks at the "outsiders". The joyous aspect of the Revolution was dimmed.

"You want land ... you paupers!"

The Cossacks stopped killing their officers and generals. And these crawled out from their hiding places to secret Cossack meetings, beating their breasts and saying things to kindle the Cossacks' passion.

"The Bolsheviks have issued a decree to take the land from the Cossacks and give it to the 'outsiders'. Cossacks are to be made labourers. Those who object will be sent to Siberia and have all their property confiscated and given to the 'outsiders'".

The brightness died out of Kuban, the tongues of a secret fire, burning low, licked the steppes, the ravines, the reeds, the back yards of villages and farmsteads.

"There is no land as beautiful as ours!"

The Cossacks again became "kulaks" and "blood-suckers".

"There is no land as beautiful as this land!"

The "outsiders" once again became "devil's offal" and "filthy intruders".

The festive board had been laid joyously enough in March 1918. It was August now, the sun was still sultry and clouds of dust dimmed the light, and that March party had broken up and the guests had turned against one another again.

No, the Kuban will never flow uphill, the past will not be brought back. The Cossacks no longer salute the officers, and they remember how these officers rode them roughshod and how they, in their turn, reduced these officers to a bloody pulp. But nowadays they reckon with what the officers say, and carry out their orders.

So the axes struck, the white chips flew, and a new bridge spanned the river. The cavalry passed it swiftly. The Cossacks were in great haste to pursue the retreating Reds.

VII

The soldiers marched beside the creaking baggage carts, swinging their arms. One had a black eye, another a misshapen nose the colour of a plum, a third's cheeks were bruised and swollen. They advanced with swinging arms and boasted with satisfaction:

"I punched him such a one on the nose that he just dropped dead."

"I got his head between my knees and bashed the hell out of him. But the bastard bit my...."

"Ho! Ho! Hah, hah, hah!" roared the nearest ranks.

"What will your wife say?"

Merrily they related how, instead of stabbing and killing, they had for some unknown reason savagely and exultantly hammered with their fists.

Four Cossacks captured in the village marched with them. They had swollen eyes and mauled faces, which created a bond between them and the soldiers.

"What was the idea, you sons of bitches, of trying to lash our teeth in? Didn't you have any rifles?"

"We were boozed; the whole lot of us," the Cossacks said guiltily, hunching up their shoulders.

The eyes of the soldiers glittered.

"Where did you get the stuff?"

"The officers found it—about twenty-five barrels buried in the ground in a nearby village. Perhaps our own people brought it from Armavir, when they looted a distillery, and buried it. The officers lined us up and said that if we took the village they'd let us have the booze. We said, 'Give it to us now, and we'll make short work of them.' Well, they gave us two bottles apiece and we drank them off; to give it a stronger kick, they wouldn't let us eat. It made us mad to get at you. As our rifles hampered us, we threw them aside."

"You bloody pigs!" cried a soldier, jumping at them with his arm raised threateningly. Other soldiers restrained him.

"Leave 'em alone! It wasn't their fault. The officers egged them on!"

At a bend in the road the column stopped, and the Cossacks began to dig a common grave for themselves.

The baggage train moved on, creaking, raising blinding clouds of dust, winding for scores of miles along the roads. Blue mountains loomed in the distance. The carts

were packed with bright red pillows, rakes, shovels, barrels; there was the glitter of mirrors, and samovars, and from among the litter of pillows, blankets, clothes, and rags peeped the curly heads of children or the ears of cats. Chickens clucked in their wicker baskets. Cows walked behind some of the carts, tied to them by ropes; panting dogs with lolling tongues and burrs in their shaggy coats went loping along, trying to keep in the narrow strip of shade. The procession of carts laden with household goods creaked on endlessly; the peasants had piled into them everything they could when, threatened by the Cossack rebels, they had to forsake their huts.

It was not the first time the "outsiders" had had to abandon their homes. Uprisings of groups of Cossacks against the Soviet power had more than once sent them roaming, but never for more than a few days; the Reds had unfailingly come and restored order, and all had then gone back. But now things were perplexingly going from bad to worse. The Cossack revolt was in its second week and was growing more furious. Their grain supply would last only a few days. Every day they hoped they would hear, "Well, you can go back home now," but—terrifying rumours came of gallows erected in the villages and of "outsiders" being hanged. When would there be an end to that? And what would become of the abandoned homes?

The carts and wagons creaked, the mirrors flashed in the sun, the chubby faces of infants nodded among the pillows, and the soldiers tramped, a jumbled crowd, along the road and beside it over the cultivated patches of land stripped clean of their watermelons, pumpkins, and sunflowers. There were no longer companies, battalions, or regiments—all had become mixed and muddled. Each man did as he chose. Some sang, others squabbled, shouted, or cursed; some climbed into the carts and dozed, their heads jolting from side to side.

Nobody bothered about danger, about the enemy; nobody heeded the commanders. If one of them attempted to restore some semblance of order in the motley rout of humanity, he received a shower of abuse; the men carried their rifles over their shoulders, butt-end up like sticks, smoked pipes, yelled bawdy songs: "We're free men. To hell with the bloody old regime!"

Kozhukh felt swamped in the incessantly flowing stream; his heart was like a taut spring in his breast. He realised that if the Cossacks attacked them, the column

would be wiped out. Nevertheless, he hoped that at the first warning of danger the soldiers would obediently form ranks, as they had done yesterday, and fight for their lives. But might it not be too late? In his desperation he wished some sobering bolt from the blue would fall quickly.

This undisciplined, roaring torrent comprised demobilized men from the tsarist army who had been recruited into the Red Army, and others who had joined the Red troops, mostly small craftsmen, coopers, locksmiths, tinkers, carpenters, cobblers, barbers, and, more numerous than any, fishermen. All these were "outsiders" accustomed to living from hand to mouth, hard-working people for whom the coming of the Soviet power had pushed ajar the closed door of life, had made them think that life itself could be rendered less drab than it had always been. The overwhelming majority of these troops were peasants. With few exceptions they had all left their farms. Only the well-to-do had remained in the villages; the officers and rich Cossacks did not molest them.

Strange by contrast, and pleasing to the eye, were the slim, narrow-waisted figures of the Kuban Cossacks, dressed in Circassian coats and mounted on sturdy horses. These were not enemies, but revolutionary Cossacks, poor Cossacks, mostly soldiers who had been at the front and upon whose hearts the undying spark of Revolution had fallen through the smoke, fire, and ravages of war. With red ribbons in their shaggy fur hats they rode on, squadron after squadron; rifles slung behind their shoulders, their silver-hilted and inlaid swords and daggers shining in the sun, their sturdy horses tossing their heads, these alone held to discipline in the ragged, disorderly pouring stream.

Those men would fight their fathers and brothers. They had abandoned their houses, cattle, and all their belongings—their households were devastated. Slim and agile, they sat their horses with natural grace, the flaring red bows tied by a dear hand on their sheepskin hats, singing as they rode, in strong, youthful voices, the songs of the Ukraine.

Kozhukh watched them lovingly. Splendid lads ... his pride and hope. But his glance was even warmer as it fell on the bedraggled horde of barefooted "outsiders" that trampled along in clouds of dust. Kozhukh himself was one of these.

Memories of his life trailed after him like a long, slanting shadow, which one may forget but never can shake off. A dark, slanting shadow of the most commonplace, toiling, hungry, drab, illiterate life. His mother's face, although she was still young in years, had been furrowed by deep wrinkles, like the face of a hard-ridden hag. She had had many children to care for; there had always been an infant in her arms and other little ones clinging to her skirt. His father had worked all his life as a hired labourer, toiling like a slave but to no avail: they had lived in dire poverty.

When Kozhukh was six he had been sent to work as shepherd to the village herd. The steppe, ravines, forests, sheep, the sailing clouds in the sky and their long shadows on the ground were his tutors.

Later, a bright and quick-witted lad, he was hired by a village kulak as assistant salesman in a shop; little by little he had taught himself to read and write. Then came military service, the war, the Turkish front. He became an ace machine-gunner. Once he climbed a mountain with his platoon of machine-gunners and got into a valley in the rear of the enemy. When the Turkish division began to descend from the range in retreat, he worked his machine-gun like a fury, mowing them down. They fell in neat rows like grass, and warm blood had poured down upon him. He had never before imagined that one could literally stand knee-deep in human blood—but that had been Turkish blood, and he had soon forgotten it.

As a reward for his great courage he was sent to the school of ensigns. He had a hard time there. He thought his head would split. He went on learning, overcoming difficulties with the obstinacy of a bull, but he failed at the examinations. The officers laughed at him, both his commanding officers and his officer-teachers; the Cadets also laughed. A peasant trying to become an officer! A *muzhik*, a brainless brute! Ha, ha!

He hated them silently, his teeth set, his eyes glaring. He had been returned to his regiment as unfit for the school.

Shrapnel again, thousands of deaths, blood, agony. Again his machine-guns did their grim work and rows of human bodies were cut down like grass. For he had a wonderfully true eye. For whose sake, in those days of superhuman strain, with death perpetually beside him, for whose sake was this knee-deep blood shed? Was it for the

tsar, the fatherland, the orthodox faith? He did not ask himself those questions, or if he did, vaguely and undecisively. What he thought of mainly was clear and precise: to become an officer, to scramble up amid the groans and anguish, death and the welter of blood, even as he had become a salesman after being a shepherd. He set his teeth and worked his guns, imperturbably calm where shells rained, as calm as if he were cutting grass in his own field.

For a second time he was sent to the school of ensigns. There was a shortage of officers; there were always too few officers in the battles; and, indeed, he had acted as one, sometimes commanding a large detachment and never suffering defeat. He belonged with the soldiers; had sprung from the earth like them, had toiled at it as they had toiled; therefore the soldiers had followed him without question, their gnarled leader with the iron jaws who stopped at nothing. For whose sake did they do it? Was it for the tsar, the fatherland, the orthodox faith? Perhaps. But that was remote, perceived as through a bloody mist. What was immediate and imperative was to advance, to advance at all costs. If they stopped they'd have been shot from behind. It was safer to move on with their own gnarled, peasant leader.

How hard, how bitterly hard learning was. Yes ... his head seemed to split. It was far more difficult to master decimal fractions than to face death in a storm of gunfire.

The officers rocked and held their sides, the officers who'd packed themselves into the school in superfluous numbers—safety first, the rear was always a snug place, flooded with those eager to avoid the risks of the battlefield and for whom countless useless functions had been created. The officers rocked and held their sides: fancy, a peasant, a gawky rustic, one of the despised rabble! They derided him, failed him for answers which, with intense effort, he had finally managed to get right. And they sent him back, sent him to his regiment for mental incapacity!

Bursts of gunfire, exploding shrapnel, monotonous rattling of machine-guns, flaming red hurricane and death, death, death.... And he in the midst of it all, a calm, business-like peasant.

This peasant had the obstinacy of an ox and pressed on indomitably—it was not for nothing that he was a

Ukrainian, that his brow shelved over his eyes, his small gimlet eyes.

And for his capability he was relieved a third time from his deadly work and, for the third time, sent to the school.

And again the officers rocked and held their sides. That peasant, that gawky rustic, one of the rabble, had turned up again like a bad penny! And once more they sent him back to the regiment for mental incapacity.

Then headquarters interfered and wrote in irritation: "Promote him from the ranks ... officers are dangerously scarce."

Scarce, were they? Yes, in battles—because of the rush to the rear. So Kozhukh had been contemptuously commissioned. So bright straps glittered on his shoulders when he returned to his regiment. He had won his place. He had felt exultant and bitter. Exultant because he had got what he wanted by dint of a tremendous, superhuman effort. Bitter because the glittering shoulder-straps separated him from his kind, from the field labourers, the plain soldiers, and, separated from these, he was no nearer to the officers. A void encircled him.

The officers did not say outright the words "peasant", "rustic", "rabble", but in the bivouacs, mess rooms, tents, in all the places where two or three men with shoulder-straps gathered, he had felt a void around him. But what they did not utter with their tongues they had said with their eyes and faces, with their every gesture: "A peasant ... one of the filthy rabble ... a gawky rustic."

He hated them from the core of his being. He despised them, outwardly calm and stony. He shielded himself from them and from the aloofness of the soldiers with an armour of fearlessness amidst the dying and dead.

And suddenly everything reeled: the mountains of Armenia, the Turkish divisions, the soldiers, the generals with bewildered and uncomprehending faces, the silent guns, the March snow on the high summits. It was as if space had been rent asunder and something unimaginably wonderful had appeared in the rift, something which had always been there, lurking in mysterious depths, nameless, but which now revealed itself, something simple, obvious, inevitable.

People came, ordinary people with the lean, yellow faces of factory workers, who began to widen the rent more and more. And from it flowed age-long hatred, age-long oppression, age-long rebellious slavery.

And for the first time Kozhukh regretted the straps on his shoulders for which he had so grimly striven, regretted them because they marked him as an enemy of the workers, peasants, and soldiers.

When the reverberations of the October thunder reached him, he tore off his straps and flung them away with loathing. Caught up by the irresistible tumultuous stream of homeward-bound soldiers, he concealed himself in the corner of a cattle truck packed to bursting point. Shouting songs, the drunken soldiers looked for escaping officers. He had not a chance had he been discovered.

When he reached his native village, everything had gone to pieces; what had superseded the old order in human relations was confused and uncertain. The Cossacks embraced the "outsiders" and hunted officers whom they destroyed.

Workers from the factories and revolutionary sailors who had scuttled their ships came to the Kuban. They were like yeast in dough: the whole region fermented and rose. The Soviet power was proclaimed in all villages and farmsteads.

Although Kozhukh lacked the new political phrases—classes, class struggle, class relations—he understood what the workers said, understood intuitively. His stony hatred of officers faded almost to nothing before his deep instinct for class struggle—he realised that officers were merely pitiable hirelings of the landlords and bourgeoisie.

The shoulder-straps he had won by dogged pertinacity seemed to have branded him. The peasants knew that he belonged to them, but still looked at him askance. He determined to eradicate the stigma, to devote the whole of his grim Ukrainian pertinacity to it; he'd burn it out with red-hot iron, cleanse it with his blood in the service of the poor masses with whom he was indissolubly at one, as he had never been before.

And then it happened: the poor peasants set their hands to wiping out the bourgeoisie and as all who possessed a second pair of trousers were suspected of belonging to that class, they went from house to house, broke open lockers and boxes, hauled out their contents, and divided them among themselves, donning what they got on the spot. This was their idea of establishing equality.

They had visited Kozhukh's cottage in his absence and taken his clothes. When he returned in his torn tunic, battered straw hat and ragged boots, he had found nothing into which he could change; his wife, too, had been left with only one skirt. This he overlooked; one instinct alone, one obsessing thought, filled his soul to the exclusion of all else.

The revolutionary peasants then began to equalise the Cossacks. But when it came to taking the land—the Kuban boiled over and the Soviet power was swept away.

And now Kozhukh was following the creaking carts amid the babbling refugees, snorting horses, and the eternal clouds of dust.

VIII

The last station at the foot of the mountains was a scene of incredible confusion: the straggling remains of military units and separate groups of soldiers were raising hell; there was a roar of shouting, weeping, swearing. From behind the station came firing and hubbub.

Now and again heavy guns boomed.

Kozhukh had come up with his column of soldiers and refugees. Smolokurov followed with another column and with his train of refugees. Other detachments, harassed by Cossacks, incessantly poured in. Tens of thousands of doomed people were huddled together in that last bit of space; all knew that neither Cadets nor Cossacks would give quarter, that all would be killed by sword or machine-gun, or else be hanged, thrown into deep ravines, or buried alive.

More than once the desperate plaint was spread: "We are lost! Our commanders have sold us for booze!" And when the artillery fire became more menacing, the cry rose like a burst of flame: "Save yourselves any way you can! Run, lads!"

The men in Kozhukh's column did their utmost to beat back the Cossacks and restrain the panic, but it was obvious that the worst could happen at any moment.

The commanders spent their time in consultations which led to nothing. None could tell what surprise the next moment might spring.

Then Kozhukh said:

"Our one chance is to cross the mountains and make a forced march along the sea-coast to join up with our main forces. I'm starting this minute."

"If you attempt such a thing, I'll open fire on your column," said Smolokurov, a giant with a black spade-shaped beard and flashing white teeth. "We must defend ourselves honourably and not run."

Half an hour later Kozhukh's column set out and nobody dared hinder it. The moment it moved off tens of thousands of soldiers and refugees, seized by panic, followed in its wake with their carts and cattle, blocking up the highway, striving to outspeed one another and throwing into ditches those who were in their way.

And the long column began to creep up the mountain like a monstrous snake.

IX

They marched all day and through the night. Before dawn, without unhitching their horses, the column extending along many versts of the high-road, they stopped. Above the brow of the mountain, seeming quite near, big stars winked. The gurgle and chatter of water in the ravines was incessant. Everywhere mist and stillness wrapped the mountains, forests, precipices. Only the champing of the horses could be heard. Then the stars, vivid a moment before, faded; wooded outlines became apparent; the milky-white mists sank into the ravines. The caravan stirred and again began to creep, mile after mile, along the high-road.

The rising sun poured its blinding radiance from behind the distant mountain ranges, throwing long blue shadows upon the slopes. The head of the column reached the brow of the mountain and stopped in astonishment. Before them yawned a dizzy abyss and in the misty inaccessible distance lay a white town. And beyond the town rose, unexpectedly, the infinite blue wall of the sea, an immense wall whose deep hue was reflected in their eyes.

"Look! The sea!"

"But why does it stand up like a wall?"

"We'll have to climb over it."

"But why, when you stand on the shore it lies flat to its very end?"

"Haven't you heard that when Moses led the Hebrews out of bondage to the Egyptians, as we are now being led, the sea stood up like a wall and they passed dry-shod."

"But it looks as if it's barring our way instead of opening before us."

"It's all through Garaska. He has fine new boots that mustn't be wetted."

They marched down the slope, cheerfully swinging their arms, talking, laughter rippling in their ranks. Lower and lower the column descended, nobody giving a thought to the German battleship which, looking like a black and gigantic flat-iron, defiled with its smoke the blue radiance of the bay. Around it, resembling thin bits of stick, lay some Turkish destroyers, which also emitted black smoke.

Over the brow of the mountain came rank upon rank of cheerful marching soldiers. All in succession were astonished by the deep blue wall of the sea, all caught the reflection of it in their eyes and swung their arms excitedly as with wide elastic strides they descended the white, looping highway.

Then came the baggage trains: the horses, their collars riding up to their ears, shaking their heads, the cows running at a trot, boys hopping astride sticks. The men hastily took hold of the carts and pulled back against them to stem their speed downhill. All, swaying and turning with the twists of the road, trooped down in high spirits to what fate had in store. And behind them the great mountain ridge filled half the sky.

The head of the endless, snake-like column rounded the town, passing the bay and the cement factories, and trailed off as a narrow band into the distance: on the one side, were the barren, rocky mountains, on the other, the thrilling spectacle of the incredibly blue, gentle and empty sea.

There was neither smoke nor a single sail: only transparent foam endlessly tracing designs of delicate lace on the wet beach stones; and in the fathomless silence sounded the primeval song of nature which only the human heart can hear.

"Look, the sea is lying flat again!"

"Did you think it would stand up like a wall forever? It was poking fun at us when we were on the mountain. How could anyone sail over it if it stood on end?"

"Hey, Garaska! That's bad for your smart boots; they'll be soaked when you march into the sea!"

Garaska, his rifle on his shoulder, gaily tramped on, barefooted. Good-natured laughter burst in the ranks; those too far away to hear what the joke was about took it on trust and roared appreciatively.

Then a grim voice was raised:

"It's all one ... there's no way for us now to wriggle out. Water here, mountains there, and behind us—Cossacks. If we wished to take another road, we couldn't. Only thing to do is to forge ahead!"

The vanguard of the column stretched far ahead along the narrow coast, then disappeared behind some projecting rocks, its body endlessly bounding the town, while its rear was still winding gaily along the high-road that looped down the mountains.

The German commandant, quartered on the battleship, observing untoward movement in this foreign town which he still held under the control of the Kaiser's guns, resented it as a sign of disorder and issued a command that these unknown people, these carts, soldiers, women, and children, this great crowd hurrying past the town, must halt immediately, must deliver all their arms, forage, food supplies, and await his further instructions.

But the dusty grey serpent continued to glide away, making good speed; the cows went ambling on with an anxious air, the children holding on to the carts with one hand, pattered alongside as quickly as their little legs could carry them, the men whipped their straining horses. A continuous din, echoing back from the mountains, hung over the column and the blinding white dust rose in clouds.

From the town, to join them, came another stream of loaded carts which began to crash into this main stream with a breaking of wheels and axles, screams, and curses. This considerable tributary consisted mainly of sturdy sailors who reeked of spirits. They wore white sailor jackets with turned down blue collars and round caps with yellow-black ribbons dangling behind. A thousand different vehicles—carts, droshkies, phaetons, open carriages with a cargo of painted women—and about five thousand sailors, using the vilest language imaginable, poured into the baggage train.

The German commandant waited in vain for them to stop.

Then, breaking the blue stillness, came a boom from the battleship, its reverberations roaring and breaking against the mountains, in the precipices and ravines, as if huge rocks were hurtling down. Echo sent the crash back into the far distance of the tranquil blue.

Over the gliding human snake mysteriously and unobtrusively appeared a white puff, followed by a heavy

crash; the white puff, gently floating sideways, began to melt.

A sorrel gelding reared and thumped heavily to the ground, breaking both shafts of the cart he was hitched to. A score of people rushed to him, seized his mane, tail, legs, ears, forelock and dragged him from the high-road into the ditch where they dumped the cart after him, so that the baggage train which proceeded several carts abreast, taking up the whole width of the road, should not be for a moment delayed. Weeping, Granny Gorpina and Anka snatched what they could from the upturned cart, threw their rescued belongings into the nearest vehicles, and tramped along on foot; the old man hurriedly and with shaking hands cut the harness from the dead horse and dragged off its collar.

Another huge, blinding tongue flashed on the battle-ship, once more a crash shook the town, rolled among the mountains, and echoed back from behind the smooth sea; again a snowy white puff appeared in the sparkling blue sky and several people fell moaning. In a cart an infant, greedily sucking the breast of a young woman with black eyebrows and earrings in her ears, suddenly became limp, his little hands fell away from the breast, his lips opened and let go of the nipple. The mother gave a wild animal cry. People rushed to her but she repelled them fiercely and obstinately pushed her nipple, from which the milk was dripping in warm white drops, into the baby's tiny mouth. The little face, with upturned eyes which had lost the sparkle of life, was already turning yellow.

The serpent went on gliding round and past the town. Then high up on the brow of the mountain, in the light of the setting sun, appeared people and horses. They were tiny, hardly discernible—the size of a thumb-nail. They were desperately busy at something, darting about near their horses, then suddenly they froze still.

And almost immediately came four booms in quick succession which rolled and echoed in the mountains, while down below, on both sides of the high-road white puffs formed quickly in the air, exploding high at first, then lower and lower, always nearer to the road; and here and there people, horses, cows began falling; people were at once picked up heedless of their groans and put into carts, the killed and wounded horses and cattle were dragged out of the way, and the serpent glided on and on without breaking, vehicle after vehicle.

The Kaiser's commandant was quick to take offence. He might shoot women and children to maintain order, but others must not do that without his permission! The long trunk of the gun on the battleship rose and boomed, putting out a huge flaming tongue. High up above the blue abyss, above the baggage trains, above the mountains, something flew hissing and landed with a crash on the ridge where the people who were no bigger than a thumb-nail stood with their horses and guns. And again these began to dart hither and thither. Their battery of four cannon began to retort to the commandant and now puffs of white smoke formed in the air above the *Goeben*.

The *Goeben* fell into a moody silence. Her funnels belched forth great clouds of black smoke. Grimly and heavily she sailed out of the blue bay into the deeper blue of the sea, turned and...

...and the sky and the sea exploded. The sea's blue was dimmed. The earth shook underfoot. People felt a horrible weight on their chests and brains, the doors and windows of houses burst open, and for the moment all creatures became deaf.

On the mountain ridge, a dense, greenish black mass, impermeable to the sun's rays, began to rise and billow. A few Cossacks who had escaped with their lives frantically whipped their crazed horses through its poisonous smoke, urging them at a gallop uphill with their one remaining gun. In a twinkling they disappeared behind the ridge. And the ghastly green cloud still hovered, slowly dispersing.

The inhuman shock opened fissures in the ground and set graves gaping; on all the streets appeared ghosts of men with waxy faces, black holes for eyes, in ragged, foul-smelling underwear; they dragged themselves along, crawled or hobbled, all drawn to the one place—the high-road. Some moved silently, with concentrated faces and unwavering staring eyes, painfully dragging themselves; others, taking wide strides with their crutches, swung forward, their legless bodies making better speed than many two-legged ones, others again ran shouting incomprehensible words in hoarse and breaking voices.

And thinly came the cry, like that of a wounded bird, from somewhere in space:

"Water, water, wa-a-ter!" Like the cry of a wounded bird in a parched field.

A young man in tattered linen, through which his yellow body showed, stumbled forward on benumbed legs, staring ahead but seeing nothing with his feverish eyes.

"Water, wa-a-ter!"

A nurse, her hair cropped short like a boy's, a faded red cross on her ragged sleeve, ran after him on bare feet.

"Stop, Mitya. Where are you going? I'll give you water, but stop. Come back. They are not beasts after all."

"Water, wa-a-ter!"

The townsfolk hastily closed the doors and windows of their houses. People were shot in the back from attics and from behind fences. The hospitals, and private houses were disgorging their inmates: they crept out of the doors, climbed out of the windows, threw themselves down from the upper stories, and crawled or dragged themselves after the moving baggage train.

There was the cement works, and the highway. And along it hurried cows, horses, dogs, people, carts—the serpent's tail.

Legless, armless, with roughly bandaged fractured jaws, with turbans of bloody rags on their heads and bandaged bellies, they hastened, sullen-faced, grim, starting ahead, their feverish eyes intent on the high-road. And the air rang with their persistent, imploring cries as they saw the carts rumble by and the people walk past with frowning faces, their eyes fixed unwaveringly on the road ahead.

"Brothers! brothers!... Comrades!..."

Hoarse, broken, or piercingly ringing voices came from all sides and were heard at the very foot of the mountains.

"Comrades, I haven't got typhus ... not typhus ... I'm wounded, comrades...."

"Nor I, comrades ... I haven't got typhus!"

"Nor I...."

"Nor I...."

But the carts went on.

One of the invalids gripped with both hands the frame of a cart piled high with household goods and children, and hopped along beside it on one leg. The owner of the cart, a man with greying moustaches and a dark, weather-beaten face, bent down, seized the cripple by his only leg and hoisted him into the cart on top of the children who at once burst out into shrill cries.

"Look what you're doing ... squashing the children!" protested a woman in a kerchief, set awry on her head.

The one-legged man's face was wreathed in smiles; he felt himself the happiest mortal on earth.

People streamed along the high-road, stumbling, falling, picking themselves up again or remaining motionless, white objects by the ditch.

"Brothers, we'd take you all with us if we could. But we can't. There's so many wounded of our own and nothing to eat.... You'd perish with us. It makes our hearts bleed to leave you...."

The women blew their noses and wiped away the tears that welled up in their eyes.

A very tall soldier with a grim face and only one leg, his eyes fixed ahead, jerked himself forward on his crutches with big, determined strides, indefatigably advancing along the high-road and muttering:

"To hell with the lot of you, bastards ... to hell...!"

The baggage train gradually disappeared from view. One could see only the dust raised by the wheels of the last carts and hear faintly the creaking of the iron axles. The town and the bay lay far behind. There was only the high-road left and, at wide intervals, the corpse-like men slowly trailing after the vanished column. One by one they gave up helplessly, sitting down or stretching themselves out on the bank by the roadside, their dull eyes fixed on where the last cart had disappeared. The dust, reddened by the rays of the sinking sun, slowly settled.

Only the one-legged giant on crutches continued to jerk his body forward on the empty high-road, muttering as he went:

"To hell with the bloody lot of you. We shed our blood for you, bastards!..."

Cossacks entered the town from the opposite end.

X

The night dragged through wearily and the black stream of humanity poured on and on, never stopping, never slackening its noisy progress.

The stars began to wane. The sun-scorched, bluff mountains, the ravines and crevices emerged in dim outlines.

With each moment the sky grew lighter, and the boundless expanse of the ever-changing sea appeared, now delicately tinted with lilac, now smokily white, now glazed over with the blue of the sky.

As the mountain tops lighted up, dark, swaying bayonets became discernible.

There were vineyards on the craggy ravines, descending to the very high-road, and gleaming white summer cottages and empty villas; and here and there stood men in home-made straw hats, who rested on their spades and picks as they gazed at the columns of soldiers passing with swinging arms and countless bristling, swaying bayonets.

Who were they? Whence had they come? Whither marched they, without ever stopping, wearily swinging their arms? Their faces were yellow like tanned hide; they were bedraggled and dusty, their eyes dark-rimmed. The carts creaked to the thud of weary hooves; the children peeped out of the carts. The heads of the exhausted horses hung low.

The men on the mountain slope resumed their work, digging the earth. What did they care for these people? But when, weened, they paused to straighten their backs, they could see the column patiently twisting along the winding coast, ramping on and on with swaying bayonets....

The sun, high above the mountain now, impregnated the earth with heat, and the sparkle of the sea made one's eyes ache. Hour after hour they tramped on, marching, marching. People began to stagger, horses stopped and refused to budge.

"This Kozhukh must be crazy!"

Cursing became general.

An orderly reported to Kozhukh that two of Smolokurov's columns which had joined them with their baggage trains had stopped behind for the night in a roadside village, so that now there was a gap on the high-road of some ten versts between the two bodies of marchers. Kozhukh's small eyes narrowed, as if to extinguish their ironic gleam. But he said nothing. The column tramped on and on.

"He'll be the death of us!"

"Why does he push us like this? There's the sea on our right, mountains on our left. Who can attack us? This march is worse than the Cossacks, we'll die of fatigue. We've already left five horses on the road, and people are dropping out...."

"Why obey him?" cried the sailors; they were all armed with revolvers and bombs, their chests criss-crossed with belts of cartridges. They walked by the moving carts and mixed with the marchers.

"Can't you see he's got his own plan? Wasn't he once an officer? And he's still one. Mark what we say. He'll fix the lot of you. You'll see, when it's too late...."

When the sun was in its zenith, they halted for fifteen minutes to water the horses. The sweat-soaked people also drank and then resumed their march along the burning road. They could scarcely drag their leaden limbs, and the breeze that fanned them was sultry. And the sea was dazzlingly bright. On and on they went, no longer suppressing their murmurings which began to breed disorder in the ranks. Some battalion and company commanders declared to Kozhukh that they would detach their units, give them a rest, and go on independently.

Kozhukh's face darkened, but he gave them no answer. The column went on and on.

At night they stopped. Their camp-fires shone through the darkness for dozens of versts along the high-road. The gnarled and stunted scrub was cut—there were no forests in that desert region; fences round the gardens of the summer villas were pulled down, window frames and furniture hacked for firewood. Over the fires hung kettles of food.

After their superhuman strain, all could be expected to drop and sleep like logs. But the illumined space around the fires was alive with excited people. There was talk, laughter, and the sound of accordions. The soldiers joked together, pushing one another into the fires. They went to the baggage train and flirted with the girls. Porridge was boiling in kettles. The flames of the big fires licked the sooty cauldrons of the companies. Here and there field kitchens sent up smoke.

The huge camp looked as if it meant to stay here a long time.

XI

The night, while they marched, had been of a piece. When they stopped it broke into fragments, each filled with its own individuality.

Granny Gorpina squatted beside a small fire over which boiled the kettle she had rescued from the abandoned cart. She was dishevelled and looked like a witch in the red glow. Beside her lay her husband asleep on a drab woollen cloak, a corner of which he had thrown over his face, notwithstanding the warm night. Gazing into the fire Granny Gorpina complained:

"I have no dish or spoon. And I had to leave my barrel on the road. Who'll pick it up? It was a good barrel, made of maple wood. And shall we ever have a horse like our sorrel? He always went stoutly, never wanted the whip. Old man, sit up and eat."

"Don't want to eat," said the old man hoarsely, from under the cloak.

"What's that you say? If you don't eat you'll be ill. Do you expect me to carry you along in my arms?"

The old man remained silent, keeping his face covered.

A little distance off on the high-road the slim, white figure of a girl loomed beside a cart. And her young voice was heard entreating:

"Why, dearie, you must give him up. Please, do! You can't go on like that...."

Other female figures showed white around the cart, and several voices added simultaneously:

"You must give him up. The little angel must be buried. The Lord will have his soul."

Men were standing by but did not speak.

The women continued:

"Her breasts are so hard. You can't pinch them even."

They put out their hands to feel the swollen breasts which resisted the pressure of their fingers. The young mother, with streaming hair, and eyes that shone in the dark like a cat's, bent her head over her breast which protruded from her torn blouse and, taking the nipple between her fingers, introduced it tenderly into her baby's cold mouth.

"She seems turned to stone."

"The body stinks already. It's impossible to stand here...."

Some of the men raised their voices:

"It's no use talking to her ... take it away."

"It will spread disease! She can't go on like that! Must bury him."

Two men attempted to take the little body, forcibly opening the mother's arms. The darkness was torn by an insane, animal cry; it rang out over the fires that burned in a chain along the high-road, resounding over the dim, invisible sea and in the mountain vastness. The cart rocked with the violent struggling.

"She bit me...!"

"The devil of a woman—she bit me to the bone!"

The men retreated. The women stood by sorrowfully for a while and then went away one by one. Others came up. They, too, felt the swollen breasts.

"She will die. Her milk is clotted."

The mother sat in the cart, ragged and dishevelled, turned her shaggy head to right and left, glaring guardedly with dry animal eyes, ready to defend herself fiercely, and at intervals tenderly putting her breast to her dead baby's mouth.

The fires flickered in the overpowering darkness.

"My heart, my precious, let me take him! He is dead. We shall bury him and you will weep. Why don't you weep?"

The young girl pressed to her bosom the dishevelled head with streaming hair and wolfish eyes that glowed in the night. And she, the mother, gently pushed the girl aside, saying in a hoarse voice:

"Sh—sh.... Speak softly, Anka ... he is asleep, don't disturb him. He has slept the whole night and in the morning he'll be up and playing, waiting for Stepan. When Stepan comes he'll begin to make bubbles with his little mouth and kick his little legs and coo. He is a darling child, so good and so knowing...."

She gave a soft, tender laugh.

"Sh—sh...!"

"Anka," cried Granny Gorpina from the fire. "Come and eat your supper! The old man won't budge and you've run away ... you capering goat! The porridge is drying up."

The women continued to come up, feeling the mother's breasts and sorrowing, then departing or standing with their chins cupped in one hand, supported at the elbow by the other, and looking on. At a loss the men stood about, kindling their pipes which momentarily lit up hairy faces with a red glow.

"We must send for Stepan, else the child will rot in her arms."

"They've sent for him."

"Lame Mikitka has gone to fetch him."

XII

These other camp-fires were unusual, different in the talk and laughter around them, in the playful shrieks of the women, in the cursing and the clinking of bottles. An

improvised band of mandolins, guitars, and balalaikas suddenly struck up a tune which dispersed the darkness and made a new liveliness around the chain of fires. The black mountains sat immobile, and the invisible sea was silent.

And the people were different, big and broad-shouldered and sure of themselves. When they entered the red, flickering light of their fires they stood revealed as well-fed, bronzed men in wide-bottomed trousers with white sailor's shirts opened low on their tanned chests, and caps with ribbons dangling on the napes of their necks. Every word and gesture was accompanied by a string of oaths.

The women, when the light of the fires picked them from the darkness, made vivid patches of colour. There was laughter, squealing, and amorous play. Girls in gaudy skirts squatted before the fire, cooking or singing tipsily. Square white table-cloths were spread on the ground and there were tins of caviar, sardines, salmon, bottles of wine, jam, pastry, sweetmeats, honey. This camp was marked by the din of voices, bursts of merriment, wrangling, shouting, and sudden melodious, silvery snatches of songs played on mandolins and balalaikas. Now and again there were bursts of drunken harmony which suddenly stopped short. Yes, they could sing well ... they could do everything well! Clinking glasses, laughter, squeals, jovial obscenities....

"Comrades!"

"Hey!"

"Heave ho!"

"Come on, play that bloody accordion...."

"Oh! You've broken my bracelet, you silly devil, my bracelet...."

The girl's voice was hushed.

Then suddenly: "Comrades, why should we obey him? Has the officers' rule come back? Why does Kozhukh order us about? Who made him general? Comrades, this is exploitation of the toiling masses. They're enemies and exploiters...."

"Let's go for 'em!"

Then together, melodiously, they sang:

*Forward with courage, together in step,
Steel our spirit in struggle....*

XIII

A man sat motionless in the light of a fire, his hands clasping his knees. From the darkness behind him a horse thrust its head into the circle of red light. It picked with its soft lips at the hay strewn on the ground and munched audibly. Its big black eye, alive with violet glints, was intelligent and sympathetic.

"That's how things are," said the man, nursing his knees in meditation and gazing steadily at the restless fire. "They brought fifteen hundred sailors there, collected all they could lay hands upon. Stupid fools, those sailors. 'We are seamen; they thought; 'the sea—that's our business, nobody will molest us.' All the same, they were driven there, posted, and told to dig. And there were machine-guns all around, two heavy guns, Cossacks with rifles. Well, so they dug, those unfortunates. All young, strong men. The hill was covered with people, half-way up. The women wept. Officers went about with revolvers shooting those who didn't use their spades smart enough, shooting them in the belly for them to suffer longer. Well, so they dug and dug, and those who had bullets in their bellies crawled about, bleeding and moaning. The people groaned. The officers shouted, 'Silence, you sons of bitches...!'"

He went on with his narrative, all listening in silence, understanding what he did not say but what they all somehow knew.

The listeners stood around the fire in its red glow, bareheaded, leaning on their rifles, some lying on the ground. Out of the darkness peered intent, shaggy heads supported on fists. Bearded old men drew in their necks and bent their brows. Women in white huddled together sorrowfully.

When the fire-light was low all seemed to disappear except this lonely man, sitting with his hands clasping his knees. The head of the horse emerged for an instant behind him bending, then rising, munching audibly. The dark eye of the animal shone, full of intelligence and attention. The man seemed alone in the immeasurable darkness. But a haunting memory hung in the minds of the unseen bystanders: the steppe, windmills, and over the steppe a galloping horse; it stops ... a man drops heavily from it, bleeding from many deep wounds. Another man coming hell for leather on another horse;

he alights, puts his ear to the chest of the rider. "My son ... my son...!"

Somebody fed the dying fire with dry twisted twigs of the mountain bushes. The fire blazed up, pushing back the barrier of darkness and again the bystanders appeared, leaning on their rifles, the older men with bent brows, the women sorrowfully stooping, the prone listeners with their heads supported in their hands.

"How they tortured that girl, the things they did to her! Cossacks, a hundred of them, raped her by turns. She died under them. She was a nurse in our hospital. Short cropped hair like a boy's and always barefoot. A factory girl. So spry and clever. Wouldn't forsake the wounded. There was nobody to look after them, to give them a drink of water, heaps of them ill with typhus. They all perished by the sword—some twenty thousand of them—thrown out of second storey windows on to the pavement. The officers and Cossacks hunted over the whole town killing ... blood streamed...."

The starry night and the black mountains were forgotten; there rang out the haunting cry: "Comrades, comrades! I haven't got typhus, I am wounded...." Those unfortunates now seemed to be standing there by the camp-fire.

Then the darkness returned and the stars twinkled overhead and the man went on in measured tones, and again the listeners knew that which he left unsaid: the head of his twelve-year-old son was crushed in with the butt of a rifle, his old mother was lashed to death, his wife was raped over and over again and then hanged from a well-sweep. His two youngest children could be found nowhere. He said no word of these things but all the listeners were aware of them.

There was a strange affinity between the deep silence in the mysterious darkness of the black mountains and that unseen expanse of sea—both without sound, without light.

The red reflection of the fire flickered, making the circle of invading blackness dance. The man sat, embracing his drawn-up knees. His horse munched audibly.

All of a sudden a young man, leaning on his rifle, burst out laughing, his bright teeth gleaming in his hairless face with the red of the fire.

"In our village, when the Cossacks came back from the front, the first thing they did was they seize their officers

and drag them to the town, to the very sea. They stood them on the pier, tied stones around their necks and pushed them from the pier into the sea. Oh, how they splashed into the water and went down, down; one could see it all, the water was blue and clear, like crystal. True to God, I was there. They were long reaching the bottom, wriggling their arms and legs, like crayfish wriggling their tails.

He again burst out laughing and showed his white teeth with the red glow on them. The man sat before the fire with his hands clasping his knees. The darkness, blinking red, encircled them, and the listening crowd grew.

"And when they reached the bottom, they caught hold of one another and remained like that, huddled together. One could see everything. It was so funny!"

All listened. From the distance came the sound of concerted strings and a melody that went straight to the hearers' hearts.

"The sailors," someone remarked.

"In our village the Cossacks shoved the officers into sacks, tied the sacks, and threw them into the water."

"Why did they have to drown them in sacks?" complained a voice with the husky steppe accent. The unseen speaker was silent a moment, then added sadly, "Sacks can't be got now, and we're in sore need of them for our grain. They don't send sacks from Russia any more."

There was another silence. Maybe the cause of it was this man sitting before the fire with hands clasped about his knees.

"In Russia there is the Soviet power...."

"In Moscow."

"Where there are peasants, there is this power."

"Workers came to our place, they proclaimed liberty, put Soviets in the villages, said we should take the land away."

"They brought justice and chased out the bourgeois...."

"But aren't the workers of peasant stock? Think how many of our own folk are at the cement factories, in the creameries, in machine-building plants, and in all the mills in towns."

Then faintly, a child's voice cried, "Oh! Mummy...."

An infant began to whimper, followed by a woman's soothing voice, possibly in one of those dimly discernible carts on the high-road.

The man unclasped his hands from his knees and, standing sideways to the red glow of the fire, seized the lowered head of his horse by the forelock, slipped on the bridle, picked from the ground a sack with the remaining hay, took up his rifle, jumped into the saddle, and vanished to the sound of his horse's hooves which faded in the distance and died out.

And again to the mind's eye there was no darkness, but a limitless steppe and windmills. Stamping hooves that came from the windmills, long slanting shadows chasing the man.... Where to?... He's mad...! Come back...! But his family's over there ... here, his son lies dead....

"Second company...!"

The darkness reasserted itself with the camp-fires burning in a long chain.

"He's gone to report to Kozhukh. He knows all about the Cossacks."

"And he's killed many of them. Women and children, too."

"He's dressed like a Cossack from head to foot. Circasian coat, fur cap and all. They take him for one of themselves. 'What regiment?' they say. 'Such and such,' he answers, and rides on. If he meets a woman he cuts off her head with his sword, a little child he stabs with his dagger. He lies in ambush behind a hayrick or some corner and shoots the Cossacks. He knows everything about them, how many there are, what detachments they belong to, and reports everything to Kozhukh."

"What have the children done? They are innocent," said a woman with a sigh. Sad-faced, she rested her cheek on the palm of her hand, supporting her elbow with the other.

"Second company! Have you turned deaf?"

Those who were reclining stood up leisurely, stretched themselves, yawned and walked away. Above the mountain the stars were split over the sky. The men sat on the ground around the kettles and began to eat their porridge.

Pressing together they dipped their spoons into the company cauldron, carried them hastily to their mouths, burning their lips, tongues, throats; it hurt but they persisted, hurriedly, plunging their spoons into the steaming cauldron. Sometimes a lucky fellow fished out a piece of meat, which he quickly removed from the spoon and put into his pocket to eat later, and again dipped his spoon, watched enviously by his less fortunate but equally active mates.

XIV

Even in the darkness one could feel that the confused, pale blur yonder was a rowdy crowd advancing. Their excited voices, raucous both from exposure to every kind of weather and drinking, preceded them, burdened with oaths. The men stopped dipping their spoons and turned their heads.

"The sailors!"

"Restless fellows, can't keep quiet a minute."

The sailors came up with a chorus of abuse.

"Loafers! Here you are, wolfing grub, not caring a straw about the Revolution. You spit on the Revolution, you bourgeois scum!"

"Why do you bark at us? Windbags!"

The soldiers glared at the sailors but were wary; the rowdies were hung with revolvers, bombs, and belts of cartridges.

"Where's your Kozhukh taking you? Have you thought of that? We started the Revolution. We sank the fleet, regardless of Moscow's instructions. The Bolsheviks are messing about with the German Kaiser, making secret plans, but we shan't allow the people to be betrayed. If a man betrays the people, he'll be shot on the spot. Who's your Kozhukh? An officer! And you are sheep straggling along, all huddled together. Bloody idiots!"

From the fire which licked the sides of the big company cauldron a voice retorted:

"You've come with a lot of whores, a whole bawdy-house of them."

"It's no concern of yours. Envy us, do you? Don't poke your noses where you're not wanted, it might be bad for you. What we have we've earned. Who was it that started the Revolution? The sailors. Who did the tsar shoot? Who did he drown? Who did he chain? The sailors. Who brought literature from abroad? The sailors. Who beat the bourgeois and the priests? The sailors. You're only beginning to see daylight, whereas we sailors have shed our blood in the struggle. And while we were shedding our blood for the Revolution who but you fell upon us with your tsarist bayonets? You're no bloody good to anybody!"

Some soldiers put down their wooden spoons, took their rifles and stood up. The darkness around deepened

and the fires seemed to have been swallowed up by the earth.

"Boys, let's go for them!"

They held their rifles ready.

The sailors whipped out their revolvers and began quickly to unfasten bombs.

A grey-moustached Ukrainian, who had fought throughout the imperialist war on the Western front and had been made sergeant for his fearlessness and who, when the Revolution broke out, had killed the officers of his company, took a mouthful of hot porridge, tapped his dripping spoon over the rim of the kettle, and wiped his moustache.

"Cockerels!" he cried at the sailors. "Cock-a-doodle-doo! Why don't you crow?"

His sally produced shouts of laughter.

"Why do they treat us like dirt?" said the soldiers angrily, turning to the grey-moustached man.

Again the long string of fires flashed to the eye. The sailors began to put their revolvers into their holsters and reattach their bombs.

"Bah, you bastards are not worth troubling about!"

They moved away, a riotous horde, dimly white in the dusk, and vanished. The string of fires stretched after them. When they were gone, as a backwash of their visit, dim thoughts stirred.

"They must have barrels of booze."

"Looted it from the Cossacks."

"Did they? They paid for all they took."

"They roll in gold."

"They looted all the ships."

"Why should the money sink with the ships? Who'd be better off for it?"

"When they came to our village they made quick work of the kulaks. Put everything in the hands of the poor peasants and sent the bourgeois flying, shot some, hanged others."

"Our priest," a merry, youthful voice put in, speaking quickly for fear of being interrupted, "had just come down from the pulpit when they grabbed him and bumped him off! That was the last of him. He lay there in front of the church stinking. Nobody bothered to bury him."

The youthful voice laughed hurriedly, as if to forestall interruption. All joined in the laugh.

"Oh, look! A shooting star!"

Suddenly all strained their ears: from yonder, where there was no human being or thing, but only night and immeasurable emptiness, came a sound, or a splash, or a voice from the invisible sea.

The silence lingered.

"They're right, the sailors are. Take us, for instance. What are we roaming about for? Better for us if we had remained where we belong, each of us would have had bread, cattle. And now...."

"That's what I say, too. We followed an officer to look for what we can't get hold of."

"He's no officer. He's a man like you and me."

"But why doesn't the Soviet power help us? There they sit in Moscow, fooling, while we pay for what they've done."

From the distance, near the low burning fires, came the sound of voices as the sailors noisily proceeded on their way from fire to fire, from unit to unit.

XV

Night came into own at last. The camp-fires died out one by one until the whole bright chain of them disappeared, leaving only the soft darkness and silence. No human voices. One sound alone filled the night—the munching of the horses.

A dark figure hurriedly treaded its way among the black, silent carts; wherever it was possible the man ran along the edge of the high-road, jumping over the prone bodies of the sleeping campers. He was followed by another strange, dark figure, limping on one foot. Now and then one of the sleepers near the carts would waken, raise his head, and follow with his eye the quickly vanishing shadows.

"What are they after? Who are they? Maybe spies! Ought to stop them I suppose."

But sleep prevailed, and the raised head sank down again.

In the pitch-black silence those two went running, jumping, and picking their way through the congestion. The horses, pricking up their ears, stopped champing and listened.

There was a distant shot; the sound came from the front to the right, probably from the mountainside. It

sounded lonely and intrusive amid the tranquillity, the peaceful champing of the horses, and the darkness. Yet, it seemed to linger in the stillness, like something tangible that refused to dissolve.

Those two dark figures ran the faster.

Three more shots. From the same spot, from the mountainside to the right. Even in the darkness one could make out the blackness of the gaping gorge. Then suddenly came the next. Rat-tat-tat and, as an afterthought: ra-ta-ta.

A black head lifted, then another. A black form sat up; another jumped to his feet and groped among the stacked rifles for his particular rifle, then gave up.

"Eh, Gritsko, d'you hear that? D'you hear?"

"Shut up!"

"But d'you hear ... the Cossacks!"

"Shut up, you fool, or you'll get it in the puss."

The first speaker turned his head about, scratched his loins and back, then took a few steps to where a grey coat was spread on the ground and lay down in it snuggling himself into a tolerably comfortable position.

Rat-tat-tat.

Again three sharp clean shots.

Tiny flashes, like pinpricks, showed for a split second in the gaping darkness of the gorge.

"To hell with them! Can't they stop! People are dog-tired, just settled down for a rest, and there they go potting at them, the swine. Wish somebody'd do the same to them, curse 'em! When there's a fight, do your damndest, fight till you drop, tooth and nail, but when people are sleeping, leave 'em alone. You get nothing by it, only waste your cartridges, that's all ... spoiling people's rest...."

And a moment later the regular breathing of another sleeping man mingled with the munching of the horses.

XVI

The foremost of the two running figures drew a hard breath and said:

"But where are they?"

His companion answered without stopping:

"Quite near. Under that tree, there, on the high-road."

He cried out:

"Granny Gorpinal!"

From the darkness came the query:

"What do you want?"

"Are you there?"

"We're here all right."

"Where's the cart?"

"Here, quite close to you. To the right, over the ditch."

Then out of the darkness came a dove-like voice broken with sudden tears.

"Oh, Stepan, Stepa-an! He is dead!"

The young mother held out her arms and surrendered her baby. Stepan took the strangely cold bundle that gave out a heavy smell. She pressed her head against Stepan's chest, and the darkness rang with her heart-rending sobs.

"He is dead, Stepan."

The women gathered around her, held back neither by fatigue nor sleep. Their dim silhouettes stood about the cart. They crossed themselves, sighed, offered advice.

"It's the first time that she has wept."

"She'll feel better after it."

"Her milk must be sucked away, or she'll go mad."

One after another the women felt her distended breasts.

"Hard as stone."

Then, crossing themselves and muttering prayers, they put their lips to her nipples and drew at them devoutly, spitting out the milk in three different directions and making the sign of the cross.

The men began to dig in the darkness among the grappling, low-growing prickly mountain bushes: they threw up the earth, placed the bundle in the hole, and filled it in.

"He is dead, Stepan!"

Dimly visible in the darkness the black figure of the man hugged a gnarled tree-trunk, uttering low, childish sounds of grief. And the woman clung with her arms about his neck, crying and choking with tears:

"Oh, Stepan, Stepan, Stepan!"

And her tears seemed to glow in the dark.

"He is dead ... dead, Stepan!"

XVII

Night was supreme. No fires, no voices. Only the munching of the horses. And soon even they were still, some of them lying down. Dawn was approaching. At the

foot of the black silent mountains sprawled the huge, sleeping camp.

But to one spot only the night's darkness failed to carry its spell of irresistible sleep. A light shone through the trees of a quiet garden. One man kept vigil for all the rest.

In a great, oak-panelled room, hung with valuable pictures which had been prodded with bayonets, in the dim light of a candle sealed to the table, soldiers lay asleep and snoring, in varied postures, on the luxurious draperies which had been torn from the windows and doors. Saddles were heaped and rifles were stacked in all the corners. The air was heavy with the smell of human sweat and the sweat of horses.

A machine-gun in the doorway peered out into the darkness with narrowed eye.

Kozhukh bent over the carved oak table which stretched almost the whole length of the great dining-room, his gimlet eyes glued to a map. The candle flickered, throwing live shadows upon the floor, walls, and faces.

His adjutant also stooped over the blue sea and mountain ranges that looked like twisting millepedes.

An orderly with a leather satchel, his rifle slung behind his back, his sword strapped to his hip, stood at the ready. The flickering candle cast dancing shadows upon him, too.

For a moment the candle burned low, and all the shadows became still.

"From this ravine here," said the aide, poking his finger into a millepede, "they can still attack us."

"They can't break through here. The mountains are high and impassable, and they can't get across the other side to get at us."

The aide dropped some hot wax on his hand.

"We must get to this turning here; that will put us out of their reach. To do that we must make a forced march."

"No grub."

"What of that? Staying here won't give us any. The only way to save ourselves is to move on. Have the commanders been sent for?"

"They're coming," said the orderly with a forward movement which set the shadows dancing on his face and neck.

In the tall windows alone the pitch darkness remained undisturbed.

Rat-tat-ta-a-a-a.

The distant echoing rattle from the black ravine again filled the night with threats.

Heavy footsteps on the stairs, across the veranda, and then into the dining-room seemed to carry that threat or news of it with them. Even in the thin flame of the candle how dusty and begrimed were the commanders that entered. Their faces were sharp and drawn from the heat and exhaustion and the continuous marching.

"How goes it?" asked Kozhukh.

"We drove them off."

Everything was dim and confused in the dining-room.

"They can do nothing," said another man in a thick, husky voice. "It'd be different if they had artillery. They've only got one machine-gun on a pack horse."

Kozhukh's face seemed to be carved in stone. He frowned deeply and his heavy brows almost covered his eyes. All of them saw that it was not the Cossack attack which troubled him.

They crowded round the table, some smoking, some munching crusts of bread, others, utterly spent, were gazing abstractedly at the map which made a motley patch on the table.

Kozhukh spoke through clenched teeth:

"You don't obey orders."

At once shadows began to flit over the exhausted faces and grimy necks; the room was full of loud voices accustomed to shouting orders in open spaces:

"You've driven the soldiers dead...."

"My unit is worn out, I'll never make them set up and march."

"When we halted, my men simply dropped to the ground. Didn't even attempt to light fires. They were as good as dead."

"Such marches are impossible. If you go on like this you'll kill the soldiers."

"Sure thing!"

Kozhukh's face remained impassive. From beneath his heavy brows his small eyes did not so much look at as listen to them in expectation. The darkness stood unstimulating in the tall open windows; beyond it the utterly weary night dozed, its tension slightly allayed. No further shots came from the ravine; but its blackness seemed the more intense.

"I, for one, don't intend to ruin my unit!" bawled a regiment commander as if he were shouting a command. "I am morally responsible for the life, health, and fate of the men entrusted to me."

"Quite right," agreed a brigade commander, conspicuous for his bulk, self-assurance, and compelling manner.

He had been an officer of the regular army and felt that now was the time to show his weight and all the higher gifts that had been so unreasonably and unprofitably suppressed by the pundits of the tsarist army.

"Quite. And moreover, the marching orders have not been properly worked out. The units should be differently placed: they are in constant danger of being cut off."

"Well, if I were one of them," interrupted the commander of the Kuban hundred, a tall, slender man in a Circassian coat with a silver dagger passed slantways through the belt, and his fur hat set at a rakish angle upon his head, "Well, if I were one of those Cossacks, I'd dash out of the ravine and our solitary gun would have been gone before we knew anything was happening."

"And that absence of plans and orders! What are we, a band, a disorderly horde?"

Then Kozhukh spoke very slowly and distinctly:

"Who's in command? You or me?"

His words hung heavily in the disturbed atmosphere of the big room. His gimlet eyes still had that look of expectation but it was not any answer that he awaited.

Again the shadows danced, changing the expression of faces, changing the faces themselves. And again hoarse, unnecessarily loud voices filled the room.

"We commanders are also responsible, same as you."

"Even under the tsar officers were consulted in moments of stress, and this is Revolution!"

The purport of this was:

"You are an uncouth simpleton, a son of the earth and you do not, cannot, fathom the complexity of the situation. You earned your rank at the front, where, when regular officers were scarce, any idiot was promoted to fill a gap. Now the masses have chosen you, but the masses are blind."

Thus said the eyes, the faces, the attitudes of the professional officers of the old army. Whereas the commanders that were recently coopers, carpenters, tinkers, or barbers, seemed to say:

"You're one of us, and no better than us! Why should you be in command instead of us? We could do the job quite as well and better."

Kozhukh was aware of these trains of thought. He sensed the unuttered criticism and with narrowed eyes kept listening to the darkness behind the windows. Listening and biding his time.

And his patience was rewarded.

Far away, somewhere in the darkness, a faint hollow noise arose. It gained in strength, intensity, and clearness. The night began to swell heavily with the sound of feet pounding in the darkness. The pounding rolled up to the steps, lost its measured rhythm, got muddled. Men were ascending the veranda, crowding it, and a continuous stream of soldiers began to pour through the blankly staring doorway into the dimly lit dining-room. They came until they filled the room. They were hardly discernible, one could only feel that they were numerous and all alike. The commanders pressed together at the end of the table where the map lay. The almost burnt-out candle gave little light.

In the murk the soldiers cleared their throats, blew their noses, spat on the floor, rubbing the spittle with their boots, and smoked. Evil-smelling smoke spread over the crowd.

"Comrades!"

Silence fell in the darkened, crowded room.

"Comrades!"

Kozhukh forced the words out through his clenched teeth.

"You must know, comrade representatives of the companies, and you, comrade commanders, how we stand. The town behind us and the port are occupied by the Cossacks. About twenty thousand wounded and sick Red soldiers remained there, and all of them have been killed by the order of the Cossack officers. They'll deal with us in the same way. The Cossacks are close upon the heels of our third column. To our right we have the sea, to our left, the mountains. In between is a gap and along that we are now moving. The Cossacks are following us behind the mountains, reaching at us through the ravines, and we have to beat them back every minute. They'll continue to attack us till we get to where the mountain range turns away from the sea—there the mountains are high and wide, and we shall be out of the Cossacks' reach.

Therefore we must follow the coast to Tuapse, three hundred versts from here. There we'll take the high-road across the mountains, and so cross back to the Kuban territory where our main forces are concentrated. It's our one chance. We must make a forced march. We have food for five days, after that we starve. We must march, must run for all we are worth, without stopping to drink or sleep. We must run desperately—in this lies salvation; and if our way is blocked we must push through."

He stopped, without looking at anyone in particular. Silence held the crowded room, silence and the shadows from the dim light of the nearly burnt-out candle. And silence held the immeasurable night behind the black windows and the vast sea.

Hundreds of eyes gazed fixedly at Kozhukh's face. There were clustered tiny white bubbles of saliva on his clenched teeth.

"You'll find no bread or forage on the road; we must run till we get to the plain."

He paused lowering his eyes and then squeezed out: "Choose another commander. I resign."

The candle died out; there was darkness and silence.

"Isn't there another candle?"

"I have one," said the adjutant. He struck match after match, which flared up, lighting up the hundreds of eyes fixed on Kozhukh, and then burnt low, again drowning all in darkness. Then at last a thin wax taper was lighted and the spell seemed to break. The men began to talk, stir, clear their throats, blow their noses, spit, rubbing the spittle with their boots and looking around.

"Comrade Kozhukh," said the brigade commander in a conversational voice and not as if he were shouting orders, "we know the difficulties, the terrible obstacles in our way. Behind us stands destruction and again, if we dally, we shall face destruction. It is imperative to move on with the utmost possible speed. You alone have sufficient energy and resources to lead the army out of its plight. I hope I express the opinion of all my comrades...."

"Right! We all agree. Remain in command!" cried all the commanders eagerly and as with one voice.

Hundreds of pairs of eyes gazed fixedly at Kozhukh from the dimly lit mass of soldiers.

"How can you think of resigning," said the commander of the cavalry hundred, pushing his fur hat to the back of his head. "You were chosen by the masses."

Silently the soldiers gazed with shining eyes.

Kozhukh glanced up obdurately from under his heavy brows.

"All right, comrades. But I'll make one condition for you all to sign: if an order is disobeyed, even slightly, the penalty is death. You will sign to that effect."

"Well, of course."

"Why should we?"

"Why shouldn't we?"

"As it is, we are always...." the commanders began to mumble confusedly.

"Lads!" said Kozhukh, clenching his iron jaws. "Lads! What do you think?"

"Death!" answered a concerted bark of hundreds of voices that shook the room and burst through the black gaping windows. "He shall be shot, damn him! Why should we spare him if he doesn't obey orders? Shoot him."

The soldiers, as if shackles had been suddenly struck from them, began to stir again, looking at one another, jostling, gesticulating, blowing their noses, hurriedly finishing their cigarettes and stamping with their feet on the smouldering stubs.

Kozhukh, his iron jaws set, repeated his condition, forcing his words into their brains:

"Any man who breaks discipline, be he a commander or a rank-and-file soldier, shall be shot."

"And shot he'll be! He must be shot, the son of a bitch, commander or soldier, it's all one!"

It was as if the great room itself had shouted this. Again it seemed too small for the voices and sent them rolling out into the open.

"Good. Comrade Ivanko, put it down in writing and let the commanders sign it: Capital punishment without trial for any disobedience to orders, be it ever so slight, or for any criticism...."

The aide produced a scrap of paper from his pocket and, having made a space for himself close to the taper, began to write.

"And you, comrades, fall out. Announce the passing of this decree to your companies: iron discipline and no mercy."

The soldiers, crowding and jostling one another and taking a last pull at their cigarettes, poured out upon the veranda and down into the garden. Farther and



K. Petrov-Vodkin. After the Battle



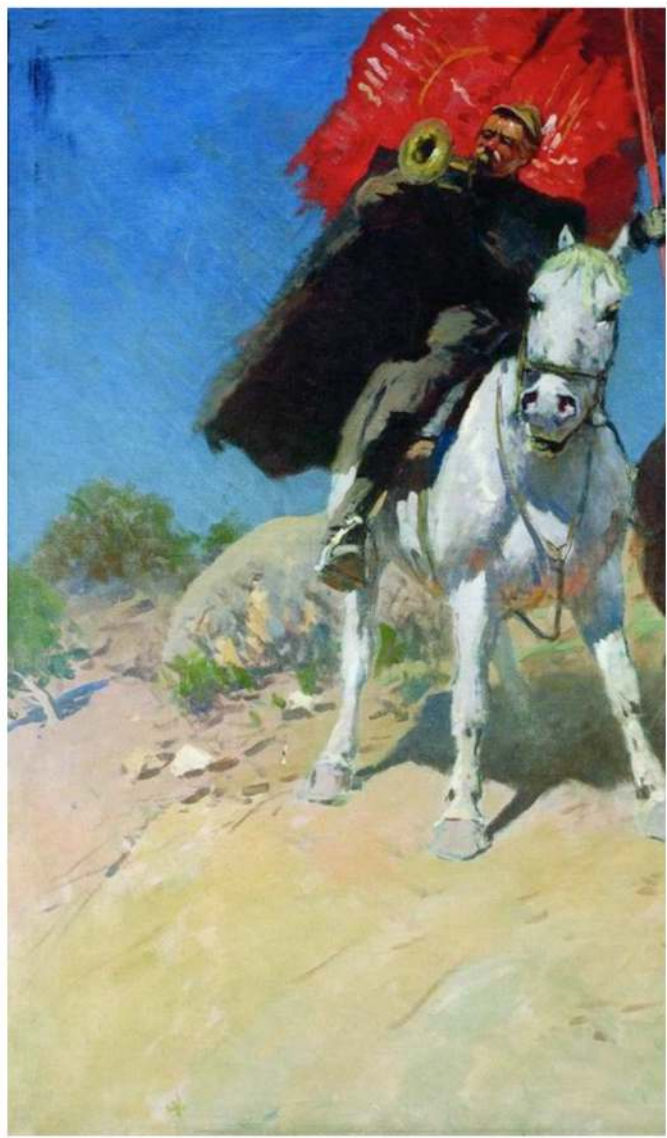


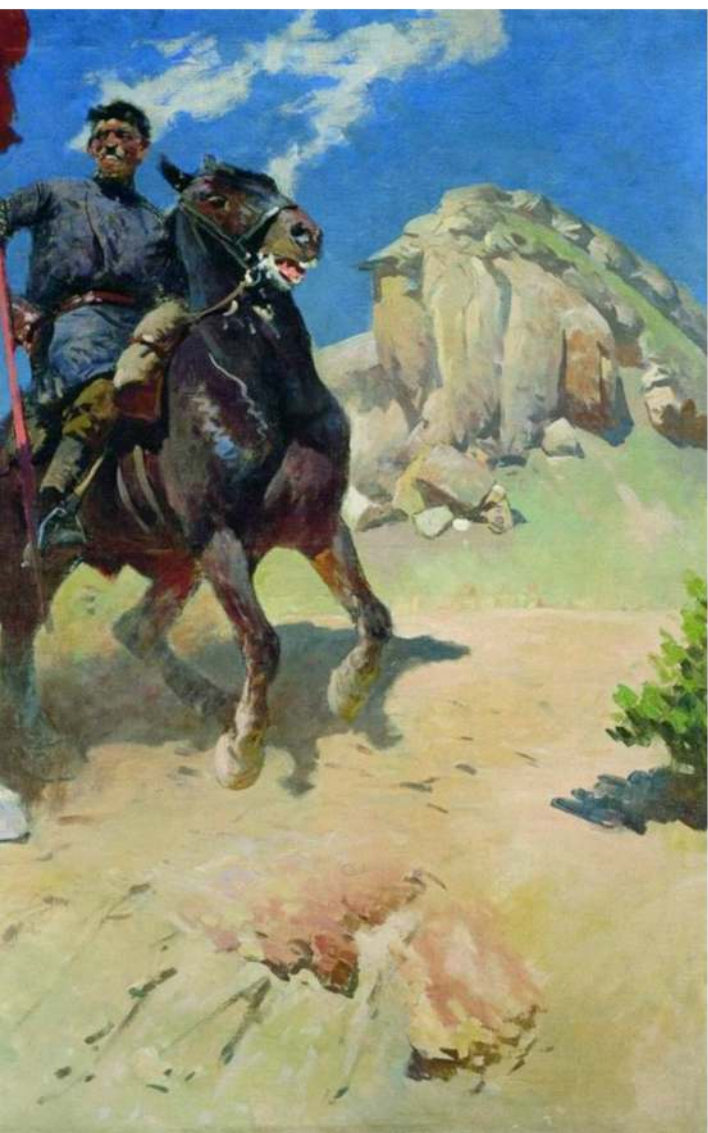
A. Kokorin. The valiant march of the Taman Army in 1918





M. Grekov. Machine-gun cart.





M. Grekov. Standard-bearer and bugler.

farther away the night became alive with their voices.

Dawn began to break over the sea.

The commanders suddenly felt that a load had been lifted from their shoulders. Now everything was definite, clear, simple; they began to speak banteringly and to laugh. In turns they came up to the table and signed the death warrant.

Kozhukh, with knit brows, gave them laconic orders, as if what had just happened had no relation to the great and weighty task he was called to fulfil.

"Comrade Vostrotin, take your company and...."

The sound of a galloping horse was heard; it drew up by the veranda; then the horse, evidently being tethered, snorted and shook itself violently, making the stirrups clank.

A Kuban Cossack, wearing a tall fur hat, appeared in the flickering semi-darkness of the room.

"Comrade Kozhukh," he said, "the second and third columns have halted for the night ten versts from here. The commander sends you word to wait till his columns catch up with you in order that all can march together."

Kozhukh turned to him a face of stone.

"Go on."

"Sailors walk in groups among the soldiers and baggage carts, yelling and spreading sedition. They say there's no sense in obeying the commanders, and that the soldiers must take control; they say that Kozhukh must be killed."

"Go on."

"The Cossacks have been driven out of the gorge. Our men climbed up the gorge and chased them to the opposite slope. We have three wounded and one killed."

Kozhukh was silent.

"Good, you may go."

In the dining-room the walls and faces had already grown lighter. In the picture frames the sea, created by a magic brush, was faintly blue, and the real sea appeared magically blue in the open casements.

"Comrade commanders, in one hour you must start, and force the pace. Halt only for the men to drink and water the horses. In every gorge a squad of men with a machine-gun must be posted. The units must follow one another closely. In no locality are the inhabitants to be molested. Mounted messengers must frequently be sent to me with reports on the situation in the units."

"It shall be so," the commanders answered.

"Comrade Vostrovin, take your company to the rear, cut off the sailors and don't allow them to march with the units. They may follow the lagging columns if they like."

"I understand."

"Take machine-guns and, if need be, use them against them."

"Very well."

The commanders all moved to the doorway.

Kozhukh began dictating to the aide as to which of them should be reduced to the ranks, transferred or promoted to a higher command.

Then the aide folded the map and left together with Kozhukh.

The flame of the candle trembled and flickered in the great empty room, the floor of which was covered with spittle and cigarette ends. The air was still and heavy with the smell of people, the spot on the table where the candle wick still burnt in a little puddle of molten wax was beginning to char, sending up a faint line of smoke. All the rifles and saddles had disappeared.

The opened doors looked out upon the blue haze, the rising sun was drawing out of the sea.

Drum beats to awaken the men rolled along the mountainous coast. Bugles sounded like cries from strange brass swans, their notes echoed in the mountains, gorges, along the coast and died in the boundless sea. Over the beautiful abandoned villa a thick column of smoke was rising majestically—the candle-end had made the most of its opportunity.

XVIII

The second and third columns which followed that of Kozhukh were lagging far behind. Nobody had the heart to make a strenuous effort—the heat and exhaustion were unconquerable. The men halted early for the night and started late in the morning. On the high-road the white, empty space between the head and rear columns steadily increased.

At night the camp again stretched for several versts along the high-road between the mountains and the coast. The bedraggled men, spent with the heat and fatigue, again built fires; again the chorus of talk, laughter, and accordions arose, again the lovely songs of the Ukraine, tender and melancholy or stern and wrathful, as the history of the people themselves, floated in the air.

The sailors, driven from the first column, still bristling with bombs and revolvers, again walked from one fire to the next, saying with curses:

"You are no better than sheep. Who is your leader? A gold-epauletted officer of the tsarist army. Who's your Kozhukh? Did he serve the tsar? He did, and now he's turned Bolshevik. And do you know what Bolsheviks are? They were sent from Germany in sealed railway carriages to spy, and there are fools in Russia who swarm around them like flies round honey. And these Bolsheviks have a secret agreement with the German Kaiser. That's it, you sheep! You are ruining Russia, you are ruining the people. We Socialist-Revolutionaries stick at nothing. The Bolshevik Government sent us orders from Moscow to deliver the fleet to the Germans. But we knew better, we sank the fleet. If they don't like it, let them.... You are ignorant riffraff, a herd of cattle that plod on with bent heads. We tell you they have a secret understanding. The Bolsheviks have sold Russia to the Kaiser. They received a whole trainload of German gold. You are a lousy mob, you...."

"Shut your mouths, yapping at us like dogs! Get out of here, you...!"

The soldiers glared and cursed but when the sailors were gone, they began to follow their lead.

"That's true.... Sailors are windbags, but there's something in what these chaps say. Why don't the Bolsheviks help us? They let the Cossacks attack us and never think of sending help from Moscow—they look after themselves, and don't give a damn about us."

As on the previous night, from the gorge, blacker than the surrounding darkness, came shots, sparks flashed, a machine-gun pattered desultorily, then the camp began to sink slowly into sleep and quietness.

As on the previous night, a conference was held in an empty villa with a veranda looking out upon the now invisible sea. The commanding staff of the two lagging columns had assembled. They delayed the conference till a horseman galloped up with a pack of stearin candles obtained in the village. As before, a map was spread on the dining-room table, the parquet floor was likewise strewn with cigarette ends, and on the walls hung badly damaged valuable pictures.

Smolokurov, enormous, black-bearded, and good-natured, encumbered by the very excess of his physical

strength, and wearing a white sailor jacket, was sitting with his knees spread wide apart, drinking tea. The commanders of his units stood around him.

From the way they smoked, exchanged desultory remarks, crushed out cigarette end under their boots, it was obvious that none of them knew how to set the ball rolling.

And here again, each of the assembled commanders considered himself possessed of an uncommon ability and called upon to save the multitude in the camp, to lead them to safety.

Where to...?

The situation was confused and uncertain. None could tell what awaited them if they went forward. But all knew that to retrace their steps would mean death.

"We ought to elect a chief for all the three columns," one commander suggested.

"You're right! That's what we should do," they all responded.

Each was burning to say, "I'm the man," but none could say it.

Since each thought himself the only possible candidate, they all kept silent and went on smoking, avoiding one another's eyes.

"We must do something, we must elect somebody. I suggest Smolokurov."

"Smolokurov! Smolokurov!"

An issue had suddenly been found. Each thought, "Smolokurov is a good comrade. The hail-fellow-well-met sort, a true-blue revolutionary with a good and loud voice to roar at meetings in the best style, but he's sure to break his neck as commander-in-chief, and then—then's my chance."

Again all cried in one voice:

"Smolokurov!... Smolokurov!"

Smolokurov made a gesture of confusion with his huge arms.

"As you all know, I am a seaman. On the sea I'd tackle a dreadnought, but we are on land...."

"Smolokurov! Smolokurov!"

"Well, if you wish, I'll tackle this job. But you must help me, all of you. I can't do anything alone. Well, all right. Tomorrow we march. Draft the orders."

All knew that orders or no orders they'd have to go on marching. What else could they do? They could neither

stop nor turn back to be destroyed by the Cossacks. All realised that they had no choice and need only to wait till Smolokurov made a mess of things and broke his neck. But how? The only course was to drag along in the wake of Kozhukh's column.

Somebody said:

"Kozhukh must be told that a new commander has been elected."

"He won't care a straw, he'll go on doing what he thinks best," the others retorted.

Smolokurov banged his fist on the map with mighty force, and the board under it groaned.

"I'll make him submit. I'll make him! He led his column past the town, he fled. He ought to have remained and offered armed resistance, laid down his life with honour on the field of battle."

Their eyes rested upon Smolokurov who had risen to his full height. It was not the words he uttered but his colossal figure and the magnificent gesture of his outstretched hand that brought conviction to their minds. They all felt that an outlet had been found: Kozhukh was the culprit, always rushing headlong, never giving a fellow a change to show him mettle and put to use his military gifts. Now every effort should be directed towards a struggle against Kozhukh. The staff sprang to action. An orderly was sent galloping off to Kozhukh. Headquarters were organised. Typewriters were found and office clerks nominated. That would make things hum.

Appeals to the soldiers, calculated to educate them politically and instill into them a sense of organisation, were typed: "Soldiers, we do not fear the enemy", "Remember, comrades, that our army scorns danger".

These orders were copied and read out in companies and squadrons. The soldiers listened without stirring or batting an eye-lid, and then scrambled to secure them, sometimes even fought for them, smoothing them out on their laps, tearing them up neatly, rolling in them coarse tobacco, and having a good smoke.

Orders were sent flying after Kozhukh, but he kept moving farther and farther every day; the empty stretch on the road between his column and the two following columns lengthened. It was very provoking.

"Comrade Smolokurov, Kozhukh makes light of all your orders and pushes along," said the commanders, "he does not seem to care a damn."

"What can I do?" answered Smolokurov with a good-natured laugh. "I'm no good on land, I belong to the sea."

"But you're commander-in-chief of the army. You have been elected to that post, and Kozhukh is your subordinate."

Smolokurov kept silent for a while, wrath welling up in him, filling his colossal chest.

"I'll show him! I'll tie him into knots!"

"Why do we drag along in his wake? We must work out a plan of our own. He means to follow the coast till he reaches the high-road which leads across the mountains to the Kuban steppe, whereas we could immediately cross the mountains by way of the Dofinovka. There is an old road there, and it's the shorter way."

"Send word immediately to Kozhukh that he must at once stop his column and report here for a conference," roared Smolokurov. "The army shall proceed from here across the mountains. If Kozhukh disregards my orders I shall destroy his column with artillery fire."

Kozhukh did not report and continued his onward progress. He remained out of reach.

Smolokurov issued an order to his army to commence the ascent. But his chief of staff, who had been through the military academy and could appraise the situation, choosing a moment when Smolokurov was alone (in the presence of the commanders, Smolokurov was invariably intractable) said: "If we cross the mountain range from here we shall lose our baggage train, the refugees, and most important of all, our artillery, because there is no road, only a mountain path. Kozhukh is acting wisely. Without our artillery we shall be defenceless. The Cossacks will capture us barehanded. Moreover, they'll defeat both us and Kozhukh while we separated."

The argument was clear. But it was less the force of it that convinced Smolokurov than the fact that his chief of staff spoke in guarded and considerate tones and did not lay boastful emphasis on his having been through the military academy.

"Send an order to continue marching along the high-road," said Smolokurov with a dark frown.

And again soldiers, refugees, and baggage trains moved on noisily, disorderly.

XIX

As always, Kozhukh's column when camping for the night forgot about rest and sleep. The darkness was resonant with voices, the music of balalaikas and accordions and the laughter of girls. The night pulsed with life; harmonies, charged with youthful resilience, mysterious import, and expanding strength, floated through the air.

*Waves as high as mountains groan
In the deep blue sea,
Brave young Cossacks weep and moan
In Turkish captivity.*

The voices soared and sank in waves of melody, swelling, receding in the night ... the heart-ache of the brave young Cossacks. Was it about themselves, too, who had fled from the captivity imposed upon them by officers, generals, and the bourgeois and were sallying forth to struggle for freedom? Their grief, mingled with joy, filled the darkness.

In the deep blue sea....

The real sea was close by, at their very feet, but it remained silent and invisible.

And harmonising with their grief and joy the tops of the mountains became delicately golden, making the mass of the range seem blacker, more mournful.

Then through the dips, crevices, and gorges the moonlight crept, diffused and powdery, blackening and thickening the sombre shadows of the trees, crags, and mountain peaks.

Heralded by its uncertain light the moon appeared, generously bright, creating the world anew. The men stopped singing. Now the fellows and the girls sitting on rocks and fallen trees became visible. The moon revealed the sea below the rocks and made it wonderfully bright, endlessly streaming like cold molten gold to the far horizon. Its splendour was dazzling.

"It seems alive," someone said.

"Some people say God made it all."

"How is it that if you sail on it you get to Rumania, Odessa, or Sevastopol, you follow the compass and you get to a place?"

"At the Turkish front, my lads, every time a battle was on, the priest began to sing psalms. But however much he sang, heaps and heaps of bodies remained on the field."

Powdery-blue strips of moonlight lay on the steep slopes, broke over the shelving rocks, snatched out a white angular cliff from a mountain, a tree branch like an outstretched arm, a precipice with corroded rocky sides, showing them in sharp contrast.

From the high-road came a tumult of voices, the tramp of many feet, curses.

All heads turned.

"Who's this bloody cursing mob?"

"The sailors. Always on the go."

The sailors were marching along, a rugged, disorderly crowd, at times bathed in moonlight, at others hidden in black shadow, and like a dense, evil, stifling cloud over them, hung the filthy words they were shouting. The girls and lads felt suddenly tired, yawned, stretched themselves and began to scatter.

"Time to go to sleep."

Hooting, shouting and swearing, the sailors approached a rocky shelf. In the shadow, hidden from the moon, stood the cart in which Kozhukh slept.

"What do you want?"

Two sentries barred access with their rifles.

"Where's the commander?"

Kozhukh had already jumped to his feet, and his eyes gleamed wolfishly in the darkness.

The sentries pointed with their rifles:

"Step back or we shoot."

"What do you want?" asked Kozhukh.

"We have come to speak to you, commander. Our food has run out. Do you expect us to starve? There are five thousand of us. We have sacrificed everything for the Revolution and must we now starve like dogs?"

Kozhukh's face was invisible in the black shadow, but all could see the gleam in his eyes.

"Join the army. You shall be put on the ration strength and given rifles. We have little food left. We only supply those who carry rifles. It's our only chance to get through. Even those who fight have a bare ration."

"Are we not fighters? Why d'you want to force us into your ranks? We know best how to act. When it comes to fighting we'll fight no worse than you. We'll fight better."

You have no business to dictate to tried revolutionaries like us. Where were you when we pushed the tsar off his throne? You were an officer in the tsar's army. Now you want us to perish after we've given everything to the Revolution. You think you can boss it here because you've made yourself commander? Fifteen hundred of our boys have laid down their lives in the town. The officers buried them alive, and now...."

"Those fifteen hundred laid down their lives, and you are here with a lot of whores...."

The sailors roared like a herd of bulls:

"You dare to taunt us fighters for the Revolution!"

They roared and gesticulated menacingly before the sentries. But Kozhukh's gleaming eyes could not be deceived; they saw everything; saw these gesticulating men, saw also the isolated figures who were creeping up from every side, crouching as they crossed the opalescent strips of moonlight and unfastening bombs as they came. And then, suddenly, all rushed upon the besieged cart.

At that moment—rat-tat-tat—a machine-gun began to rattle. It flashed in the cart, obedient to the gleaming eyes above it, so accurately that in the tangle of darkness dappled with moonlight not a single bullet pierced flesh or shattered bone, but made a deathly wind that stirred the caps of the sailors who fell back and scattered.

"The devil! And clever, damn him. That's the sort of machine-gunner one would like to have."

In the great moonlit space the camp slept. The mountains, bathed in the smoky light, also slept. Across the sea, from shore to horizon, shimmered the silvery road of the moon's reflection.

XX

As soon as it became light the column started creeping along the high-road.

To the right lay the blue expanse of the sea, to the left towered the wooded mountains crowned by barren rocks.

From over the ragged peaks poured the steadily growing heat of the morning. The high-road was clouded with dust. Myriads of flies pestered both people and beasts, familiar flies, from the Kuban steppe; they had accompanied the retreating masses from their very thresholds, they camped at night with them, and rose with them at dawn.

Twisting like a white snake, the high-road, deep in dust, wound into a thick forest. There it was still and cool with shade; rocks were visible through the tangle of trees; a few paces from the high-road the jungle was impassable; vines and lianas curled over every branch and stem. The spears of the mountain bushes bristled on every side, and the hooked thorns of strange shrubs clutched those who passed too near. It was the haunt of the bear, polecat, wild goat, deer, and of the mewing lynx. No human being for hundreds of miles. No traces of Cossacks.

Once Circassians lived here in scattered auls on the mountainsides. Here and there paths wound among rocks and through the forest; tiny grey huts, nestling under the cliffs, could be seen from below; in clearings near the water there were patches of maize and carefully tended gardens.

Seventy years ago the tsarist government drove the Circassians to Turkey. Since then, the paths became choked with weeds, the gardens grew wild, for hundreds of miles the deserted mountains became the haunt of wild beasts.

The men tightened the cords round their waists—the rations distributed at halts had dwindled.

The carts creaked, the wounded holding on to them dragged themselves along, the heads of the children bobbed, the lean artillery horses drawing the solitary gun strained their utmost at the traces.

The winding high-road began to twist down to the sea. The shimmering path of the sun lay across the blue expanse.

Translucent ripples, coming from afar in long wrinkles, endlessly lapped the pebbly shore.

The column crept along the high-road without a minute's rest; the younger men, girls, children, and the wounded who could walk scrambled down the slope stripping off their rags as they went—trousers, skirts, shirts—hastily stacked their rifles and plunged into the clear water. The impact of their bodies sent up glittering splashes which scintillated into broken rainbows. And the bathers vented their joy in laughter, cries, and shouts, that gave a living, human meaning to the coast.

The sea, like a huge beast with gentle and wide wrinkles on its broad face, placidly approved of the splashing, shouting, and hooting and blandly licked the animated coast and the yellow human bodies performing their vigorous antics.

On and on crept the column.

The bathers jumped out of the water, snatched up their evilly smelling garments and their rifles, and ran, iridescent drops of brine trembling on their tanned bodies. When they caught up with the marchers on the high-road they quickly slipped on their sweat-soaked things, to the accompaniment of bawdy jests and roars of laughter.

And immediately their example was followed by others who also ran down, flung off their clothes, and splashed boisterously while the placid beast with the gentle and wise wrinkles blandly licked their bodies.

And on and on went the column.

White summer villas appeared, then the cottages of the town, scattered on the barren coast along the high-road; everything looked hemmed in against the narrow bank of the roadway, the only means of communication among the forests, cliffs, and crags.

The men ran into the villas, searched them through, but found nothing save emptiness and desolation.

There were sunburnt Greeks in the town, Greeks with big noses and eyes like shining black plums. Their faces were sullen with lurking hostility.

"We have no bread. No bread. We ourselves are starving."

They knew not who these soldiers were, whence they had come, whither they were going. They asked no questions and were sullenly hostile.

The soldiers searched—and in truth there was nothing. But they guessed from the faces of the Greeks that they had hidden food. Because they were Greeks and not their own people the soldiers took away all the goats, ignoring the laments of the dark-eyed women.

In a wide valley which pushed the mountains far apart, they came unexpectedly upon a Russian village. A clear and sparkling river twisted through it. Whitewashed huts, cattle. One slope of the mountain was partly covered with patches of stubble and ploughed fields. They sowed wheat here. The inhabitants were people from Poltava who spoke their dialect.

These ungrudgingly shared their wheat and millet with the soldiers and beset them with questions. They had heard that the tsar was kicked from his throne and that the Bolsheviks came to power, but they did not know how things stood. The soldiers enlightened them and although

it seemed a pity to do it, since these villagers were their own people, they took all the chickens, geese, and ducks while the village women stood by wailing.

The column moved on without halting.

"Time we had some grub," said the men tightening the cords round their waists.

Men who rummaged in villas found a gramophone and a pile of records. They fixed it to a spare saddle and over the wooded stillness, across the face of the bare cliffs, and through the clouds of white dust, a rusty, reminiscently human voice screeched:

Flea! A flea! Ha! Ha!

The men marched on shaking with laughter.

"Let's have that flea thing once again!"

They listened with relish to several other records, popular or artistic. Suddenly the gramophone intoned:

God save the tsar....

A tumult arose.

"To hell with him!"

"Put it on your—!"

They snatched the record and flung it upon the road to be trampled by the thousands of marchers.

Since then the gramophone was in constant demand. Come early dawn, come deepest night, it strained and wheezed out songs and snatches of opera.

Squadrons and companies enjoyed it by turns; in some units its stay was unduly prolonged, and the men fought over it. It was a general favourite. It was regarded as something that was alive.

XXI

A Kuban horseman, bending low in the saddle, his fur hat pushed to the back of his head, came galloping full tilt towards the moving horde.

"Where's the *batko*?"*

His face streamed with sweat, and the wet sides of his horse heaved heavily.

Huge, glittering clouds appeared over the wooded mountains and beamed down upon the high-road.

"Looks like there'll be a thunderstorm."

* *Batko* means "father" in the Ukrainian language; the word is applied to leaders.—Tr.

Beyond a bend in the high-road the van of the column suddenly stopped; the infantry ranks closed up; the baggage train drivers pulled on the reins, straining up the heads of their horses; and the carts coming behind jammed against those in front of them; presently the whole train was at a standstill.

"What's up? It's too soon for a halt!"

The streaming face of the horseman, the heaving sides of his mount, and the unwonted halt evoked anxiety, which was intensified, charged with a sinister meaning, when from far ahead came the faint sound of gunfire. This ceased, but the sound left a lingering impression in the stillness that had suddenly fallen, and the impression could not be dispelled.

Even the gramophone became silent. Kozhukh drove past in a britzka, hastening to rejoin the head of the column. Then horsemen galloped up and barred the way peremptorily, cursing violently.

"Stop! Turn back. If you don't, we'll shoot! Damn you! You're not allowed to go on. There'll be a battle presently, up the road! It's orders. Kozhukh told us to shoot those who disobey."

Alarm spread. The women, old people, young girls, and children raised pitiful wails: "Where are we to go? Why do you hold us back? What are we to do? We are with you. If it's death, we'll all die together."

The horsemen were implacable.

"Kozhukh said there must be a distance of five versts between you and the soldiers. You're in the way. Understand? A hindrance in battle."

"But those ahead are our people. My Ivan is there."

"And my Mikita."

"And my Opanas."

"You'll go away ... you'll abandon us."

"Have you no brains? We've got to fight to save you. When the road's clear, you'll come on behind us. But now there's going to be a fight—you're in the way."

The carts, so far as the eye could see, were jammed together, those on foot and the wounded milling in a dense crowd. The wails of the women filled the air. The high-road was blocked for several miles, the baggage train frozen still. The flies alighted in swarms on the backs, sides and necks of the horses, the children were black with them. The horses desperately tossed their heads, kicking at their bellies with their hooves. There were glimpses

of the blue sea through the foliage. All eyes were on the section of the high-road where the horsemen barred the way. Beyond the horsemen were the soldiers, their own, dear, plain peasant men, carrying rifles—there they were rolling dry grass into leaves, and smoking them as cigarettes.

Presently the soldiers rose and marched away. The dusty stretch of the high-road widened more and more; and as it widened the menace of a mysterious danger grew.

The horsemen were deaf to entreaties. An hour passed, then another. The empty high-road assumed a deathly whiteness. The swollen-eyed women sobbed and lamented. Through the foliage the sea was blue, clouds hung above the wooded mountains.

From nowhere in particular came a resilient burst of artillery, a second, a third. Volleys roared, rolling and echoing in the mountains, the hills and gorges. A machine-gun began its deadly, dispassionate rattling.

Then all who had a whip in their hands began desperately to lash their horses. The animals sprang forward, but the mounted soldiers, cursing angrily, also began to lash the cart horses, raining blows at their heads, eyes, ears, beating them back. The beasts snorted, tossed their heads, dilated their bleeding nostrils, rolled their eyes wildly, struggled against the shafts, reared, and kicked. From behind came the drivers of other carts, hooting and hallooing their utmost and lashing the horses with their whips. The children, screaming as if they were being butchered, also flogged the horses with switches of bush, aiming at their legs and bellies, doing their best to hurt them. The women uttered piercing cries and pulled at the reins with all their strength, the wounded struck out with their crutches at the horses' flanks.

The maddened beasts jerked forward, trampling, breaking through, and scattering Kozhukh's horsemen; straining in their shabby harness they bolted along the high-road with outstretched necks and flattened ears. The peasants jumped into the carts, the wounded who had been holding on tried to run, fell, were dragged along and then, losing hold, rolled into the roadside ditches.

The wheels rumbled through whirlpools of pale dust; the empty pails hanging under the carts made a terrific rattle; the men clicked their tongues and hooted to encourage the horses. Glimpses of the blue sea flashed through the foliage.

Not until they had caught up with the soldiers did they slow down and proceed at a normal pace.

Nobody knew anything. Some said Cossacks were ahead. But how could there be Cossacks ahead; hadn't they been left behind the huge range of mountains? Some said there were Circassians, or perhaps Kalmycks, or Georgians, or people of an unknown nationality, swarms, hordes of them. All of this brought the carts of the refugees with greater insistence to the immediate vicinity of the fighting units—there was no earthly means of driving them back short of shooting them dead, every one of them.

Cossacks or no Cossacks, Georgians or no Georgians, life had to go on. The gramophone sang again:

Let my passion be quenched....

Here and there the men broke into song. They straggled along the high-road, some leaving it to scramble up to the slopes, where the brambles and thorns wrought havoc to their miserable clothes, to look for apples, albeit small and wild apples, intolerably acid. They winced, made wry faces, but filled their bellies with the unpalatable stuff. They also gathered acorns under oak-trees, chewed them, bitter saliva streaming down their chins. Then they would get out of the thicket, naked, their skin torn and bleeding, wrapping what was left of their rags around their loins.

Women, girls, and children—all went into the thicket, shouting, laughing, crying when the thorns tore their bodies and the brambles held them fast. But hunger drove them on.

Sometimes the mountains parted and on a slope they would see a patch of ripening maize, a sign of some small village perched in the vicinity. The patch of maize was at once overrun with people, thick as locusts. The soldiers broke off the green heads and ran down to the high-road rubbing them between their palms, picking out what grains they could find, filling their mouths, and chewing greedily.

The mothers also collected maize and chewed it patiently, then, with their warm tongues they pushed the soft mass, diluted with saliva, into the tiny mouths of their young.

From ahead again came the sound of shots and the rattle of machine-guns, but nobody heeded it; all were

accustomed to it. Then the noise ceased. The gramophone screeched:

I don't believe your words of love....

The refugees laughed and called to one another in the forest, and the singing of the soldiers rang out. The train of refugees was glued on to the tail of the infantry, all moved along the high-road without respite in endless clouds of dust.

XXII

For the first time the enemy barred their progress. A new enemy.

What for? What did they want?

Kozhukh saw that it was a deadlock; mountains to the left, the sea on the right, and between these the narrow high-road. On the high-road a bridge spanned a foaming mountain stream. There was no avoiding the bridge. Before it were posted machine-guns and cannon. The airy construction, trellised with rods of steel, was a trap for any army. How good it would have been to deploy his ranks! But the broad steppe was the place for doing that!

Instructions from Smolokurov's headquarters as to what action he should take against the enemy were delivered to him. His face turned the colour of a lemon, and his jaw set. He crumpled the sheet without reading it and flung it to the ground. The soldiers picked it up, carefully smoothed it out, rolled dry leaves into it, and smoked.

Kozhukh's army stretched along the high-road. He gazed at it; ragged, barefoot men; half of them had two or three cartridges each, the rest had rifles but no ammunition. One cannon and sixteen shells, all told. But Kozhukh looked at the soldiers as if each had several hundred cartridges and as if his batteries were standing in stern array with full caissons behind them. Around them he seemed to see his native steppe in which an advance in the open is a simple and natural thing.

His eyes full of his vision, he said:

"Comrades! We've fought the Cossacks and the Cadets. We know why we fought: it was because they wanted to strangle the Revolution."

The soldiers looked sullenly up at him, and their eyes said plainly:

"No need to speak. We know. But what of it? We're not going into the trap on that bridge."

"We have escaped from the Cossacks. The mountains fence us away from them. We have a respite. But a new enemy has crossed our path. Who are they? Georgian Mensheviks. And Mensheviks and Cadets are all one, they side with the bourgeoisie. Their dream is to destroy the Soviet power."

The soldiers answered with their eyes:

"You and your Soviet power! We are barefoot and naked, and have nothing to eat."

Kozhukh read the words in their eyes and understood that it meant perdition.

He played his last trump and addressed the cavalry:

"Comrades, it is up to you to take the bridge by mounted attack."

The cavalry, every man of them, realised that the commander was giving them an insane order to gallop in single file over the narrow bridge under machine-gun fire. There was no room for several horsemen abreast. It meant that half of them would strew the bridge with their dead bodies, while the second half, having no possibility of advancing, would be mown down in their attempt to retreat.

But they looked so smart in their Circassian coats, their silver-mounted arms—heirlooms in their families—shone so brightly, their high Circassian fur hats and Kuban hats were so good to look at and had such a challenging air, their splendid horses, hailing from the Kuban steppes, tossed their heads and strained at the bridle in such a spirited fashion, and everybody was so obviously gazing in admiration upon them, that they cried in one voice:

"We'll do it, Comrade Kozhukh!"

From its place of concealment Kozhukh's cannon began to fire at the spot beyond the bridge among the rocks where machine-guns were hidden, filling the gorge and mountains with its monstrosly swelling echo; and the cavalymen, adjusting their hats, without shouts or shots, dashed out from behind a bend in the road. Their terrified horses, with outstretched necks, flattened ears and red distended nostrils, carried them at a gallop to the bridge and across it.

The Georgian machine-gunners crouching under the pelting hail of shrapnel and deafened by the wild roaring of guns, endlessly multiplied by the mountain echo, were

dumbfounded by the unexpected foolhardiness of Kozhukh's cavalry, but they recovered themselves and set their machine-guns barking. One horse fell, a second, a third, but the other riders had already reached the middle of the bridge, and in a second were across it. Kozhukh's sixteenth shell burst, and ... his cavalry were over the bridge!

"Hur-rah! Hur-rah!"

Right and left they slashed with their sabres. The Georgian units, some distance from the bridge, turned tail and rapidly retreated, vanishing from sight behind a bend in the high-road.

The Georgians who had been guarding the bridge, and were now cut off from the rest of their forces, fled towards the sea. But their officers had got to the launches before them and were already racing towards the steamers. The funnels were belching dense black smoke and soon the steamers began to glide away towards the open sea.

Neck-deep in the water, the Georgian soldiers stood with arms outstretched towards the vanishing steamers. They shouted and cursed, they implored mercy for the sake of their children, but it was of no avail. Swift sabres cleaved their necks, heads, shoulders, staining the water with blood.

The steamers, dark spots on the horizon, vanished, and there were none left on shore to implore or curse them.

XXIII

The forests and gorges were surmounted by rocky peaks. When the wind blew down from them the air became fresh; but the wind did not reach the high-road which remained a prey to the dust, flies, and heat.

The high-road had penetrated a narrow passage between vertical rocks overhung by bare roots of trees. The bends and twists in the road made it impossible for any section of the column to see what those before or behind it were doing. To back out of the gorge and turn aside from it was impossible. On and on the human stream poured noisily, with no choice but steady advance. The rocks hid the sea.

Sometimes, unaccountably, the forward movement stopped. Carts, people, and horses stood for interminable stretches. Then again they moved, again stopped. Why,

nobody knew. And nobody could see anything except carts, and further on, a bend and a wall. Overhead—a strip of blue sky.

A shrill feeble voice cried:

"Mamma, give me an apple."

And from another cart:

"Ma-a-mma!"

And so on, from almost every cart.

"Shut up! Where can I get apples.... Can't climb that wall! See, there are walls everywhere!"

But the children could not be quiet. They whimpered and cried, lifting their shrill little voices desperately.

"Mamma! Give me some maize! Give me an apple... apple... maize...."

The mothers' eyes flashed. Like she-wolves at bay they glanced round wildly, then began to beat their children.

"Stop that! Can't you be still. I wish you'd die! I'm sick of the sight of you!"

They shed impotent, angry tears.

The muffled sound of shots came from afar. Nobody minded them, nobody knew anything about them.

They stopped for an hour or two, then moved on and again stopped.

"Mamma!... maize!"

The exasperated mothers, ready to kill for food, rummaged in the carts, snarling at one another. They pulled out the stalks of young maize, chewed them long and painfully, digging their teeth into them till their gums were raw and bleeding. Then they bent over the small, hungry mouths and pushed the stuff into them with their warm tongues. The children received it greedily, tried to swallow, but the straw pricked their throats. They coughed, choked, spat it out and began to wail.

"Don't want it! Don't want it!"

The mothers, in a fury, smacked them.

"What the hell d'ye want?"

The children smeared their tears over their grimy little faces, choked, and swallowed.

Kozhukh, his jaws set, examined the enemy's position through his field-glasses. The commanders crowded around him and also peered through field-glasses; the soldiers screwed up their eyes and saw as well as if they had had binoculars.

After a final bend the gorge widened. Through its wide opening remote blue mountains were seen in the distance. Vast, dense forest descended to a solid massif directly opposite the mouth of the gorge. The flat mountain top was all rock, rising vertically, thirty feet high. There, on top were enemy trenches, and sixteen guns trained on the high-road where it debouched from the gorge. When the column attempted to pass out of the rocky gate, the batteries and machine-guns showered shells and bullets, so that the soldiers promptly retired behind the rocks. Kozhukh grasped the situation: it was desperate, a bird could not have flown through here. The only way on led to certain death. He glanced down at a little town that lay white in the distance, and at the blue bay dotted with black Georgian steamers. He had to find some new way of escape—but how could he find it?

Some unprecedented manoeuvre had to be improvised—but what kind of manoeuvre? He dropped on his knees and began crawling about the map that was spread on the dusty high-road, examining all its tortuous lines, each fold and each footpath.

"Comrade Kozhukh!"

He raised his head. Two merry soldiers were standing before him on wobbly legs.

Kozhukh thought, "Drunk, the fools!"

But he looked into their faces silently.

"You see how things stand, Comrade Kozhukh, to try to go out along the high-road would be no good. Those Georgians would kill the whole lot of us. But we have just been reconnoitring, you might say as volunteers...."

Kozhukh kept his eyes glued on their faces.

"Breathe out. Don't draw your breath in. Breathe out. You know what the penalty for this is? The firing squad."

"True to God it's the forest air. We walked through the forest and, well, we got our lungs full of it."

"There are no pot-houses here, nothing of the sort!" explained one of the men who had the shrewd merry eyes of a Ukrainian. "There are only trees in the forest, nothing but trees."

"Talk sense."

"That's how it was, Comrade Kozhukh. We were walking there, the two of us, speaking of serious matters. We could either all perish here on the high-road, or turn back and fall into the hands of the Cossacks. Neither way was too tempting. What could we do? And, behold!

Behind the trees was a Georgian pot-house! We crawled up: four Georgians were drinking wine and eating shashlik. You know that all Georgians are boozers. Well, we held our noses till we could stand it no longer. They had revolvers. We jumped out, shot two of them dead. 'Don't stir. You are surrounded! Hands up!' They lost their wits. Never expected anything of the sort. We shot the third man and tied the hands of the fourth fellow. The proprietor was more dead than alive. Well, it's the truth, we ate what the Georgians left of the shashlik—let them pay for it out of their big wages—but we never touched the wine, because—well, you had forbidden it."

"To hell with the booze! Let my face be twisted sideways if I so much as sniffed it. Let all my innards——"

"Get back to the point!"

"We dragged the dead bodies into the forest, took their arms and brought the remaining Georgian here, and the proprietor, too, for fear he'd talk. We came across five men with women and girls from the town below. Russians, our own people, who have a holding near the town. These black-faced Georgians are mad about white women. Well, so they left everything and went in search of their own people. They say we can get round the town by following footpaths. Very difficult it will be, they say. Abysses, thickets, precipices, gullies, but it can be done. Now, to go straight on, they say, is no good. They know all the paths like the fingers on their hands. Well, it's a hard job. The hell of a thing, but you can go round."

"Where are they?"

"Here."

A battalion commander came forward.

"Comrade Kozhukh, we have just examined the coast, it is impossible to go that way. Steep cliffs rise from the water."

"Is the water deep?"

"Waist-deep near the cliffs; in some places it comes up to your neck, in others it covers your head."

"What of that?" said a soldier who had been listening intently. He carried a rifle and was in tatters. "There are boulders that have rolled from the mountains into the sea. We can jump from stone to stone."

Everybody offered suggestions, information, explanations, plans, some of them daring and clever. The general situation took on a clearer aspect.

Kozhukh called a meeting of commanders. His jaw was set, his eyes under the heavy brows were like gimlets, and his face inscrutable.

"Comrades, all three squadrons must go round the town. It's a stiff job. They'll have to follow footpaths, climb cliffs, go down gorges, and in the night, at that. But this job must be done at any cost."

The eyes of the commanders revealed the thought their tongues dared not utter:

"We'll all perish, not a horse will come back."

"...We have five guides, Russians, living here. They have a grudge against the Georgians. Their families will remain with us. They have been told that their families will be held as hostages. You must get into the town from the rear, burst into it...."

He became silent, gazing into the dusk that gathered in the gorge, then added laconically:

"All must be destroyed!"

The cavalrymen adjusted their hats at a rakish angle.

"It shall be done, Comrade Kozhukh." They sprang into their saddles smartly.

Kozhukh went on:

"The infantry regiment ... Comrade Khromov, take your regiment down to the sea and get over the rocks to the port. At dawn attack without firing a shot, seize the moored steamers."

Again after a silence he said:

"All must be destroyed!"

The commanders thought:

"If the Georgians put a single rifleman in the proper spot, he'll be able to shoot every man in the regiment as he appears on the rocks."

But aloud they answered unanimously:

"We'll do it, Comrade Kozhukh."

"Get two regiments ready for a frontal attack."

The crimson patches on the highest peaks began to fade out one after the other. The deeper blue of evening spread everywhere. Night crept into the gorge.

Kozhukh said:

"I shall lead the attack."

In the minds of them all, standing there silently before him, arose the picture: the dense forest, the stony ascent beyond it and then, like a symbol of finality, the vertical rock. The picture stood there for a while and was dissolved. Night settled. Kozhukh climbed upon a shelf of

rock. Beneath him stood the blurred, dark ranks of ragged, barefoot men, an unkempt crowd bristling with menacing bayonets.

All eyes were fixed on him. It was up to him to solve the question on which their lives depended. He had to find a way out of a situation without issue. Had to.

Raised above his ordinary powers by the force of those thousands of compelling eyes, feeling that he had the key to the secret of life or death, Kozhukh said:

"Comrades! We've got no choice. Either we lay down our lives here or suffer torture and death at the hands of the Cossacks who'll catch up with us soon. The odds are too great: we have no cartridges, no shells for our gun, we must fight bare-handed, and we have to face sixteen enemy cannon. But if we are all at one...."

He stopped for a second, his stern face set like a rock, and shouted in a savage voice, a voice not his own that sent a shuddering thrill through his hearers:

"If we all rush like one man, the road to our own people is open!"

What he said was not extraordinary. All knew it beforehand to the last soldier, but when he yelled in that strange voice, they were struck by the surprising novelty of his words, and the soldiers roared in answer:

"Like one man! We'll get through or die!"

The cliffs no longer loomed white in the darkness. Nothing could be discerned; the massif, cliffs, and forest were swallowed in the darkness. The last horses of the cavalry group disappeared. One could not see the soldiers descending along the bed of a dried-up stream, clutching at one another's tattered clothing to keep their foothold. One could hear pebbles rolling. The last ranks of the two regiments were swallowed up in the dense forest over which rose that symbol of finality, the vertical rock, invisible now, but ponderously present.

The baggage train was plunged in heavy silence; no fires, talk, or laughter revealed that life pulsed in it.

Even the children uttered no sound as they lay with starved shrunken faces.

Silence ... darkness....

XXIV

A Georgian officer with a short moustache and black almond-shaped eyes that made havoc, as he well knew, in the hearts of womenfolk, was strolling along the flat top

of the massif. He wore a red Circassian coat that set off his narrow waist. On his shoulders were gold straps. Now and then he threw a glance around him. What he saw were trenches, ramparts, and well-hidden machine-guns.

Forty-five yards away was the edge of the vertical precipice. It ended at the top of a steep gradient rising from impenetrable forest. Beneath the forest was a gorge from which issued an empty white high-road. It was on this high-road that the concealed guns on the plateau were trained. The enemy was there.

Sentries were walking back and forth with measured tread beside the machine-guns. Smart, spick sentries.

The ragged swine down below had been given a sharp warning when they had attempted to poke their noses out of the gorge into the high-road. They'd not forget it in a hurry.

It was he, Colonel Mikheladze (so young and already a colonel!) who had chosen this position in the pass. At headquarters he had insisted on it, a key position which commanded the whole coast.

Again he looked around the top, glanced at the edge of the precipice and the coast cliffs standing vertically in the water. Everything might have been deliberately combined to stop the advance of any army.

But to stop their advance was not sufficient, they had to be destroyed. He had already drawn up a plan: he'd send steamers to that part of the high-road which closely followed the coast-line, then fire at them from the sea, get a landing party ashore, and lock in the stinking rabble at both ends, killing them like rats in a trap.

He, Prince Mikheladze, owner of a charming landed estate near Kutaisi, would cut off at a stroke the head of the venomous reptile which crept along the coast. The Russians were the enemies of Georgia, lovely, cultured, glorious Georgia, enemies on a level with the Armenians, Turks, Azerbaijanians, Tatars, and Abkhazians. The Bolsheviks were the enemies of mankind, of world culture. He, Mikheladze, was a Socialist himself, but he—should he send for that Greek girl? Better not ... on account of the soldiers here—but he was a genuine Socialist, with a deep realisation of the historic mechanism of events, an inveterate enemy of all adventurers who fanned into flame the lowest passions of the masses under the guise of socialism.

He was in no wise bloodthirsty, he had a distaste for shedding blood, but when it came to world culture, to the greatness and welfare of his native people—well, he could be merciless, and *those* yonder should be destroyed to a man.

He strolled along, examining through his field-glasses the formidable precipice, the impenetrable gloom of the forest, the twisted white ribbon of the high-road issuing from the gorge, the eventide blush on the mountain peaks; and he listened to the stillness, the gentle peacefulness of the quiet, deepening evening.

His smart coat which showed off to such advantage his graceful figure and was made of the finest material, his costly dagger and revolver which were inlaid with gold and ornamented with black enamel, his snow-white fur hat, one of the masterpieces of Osman, that justly famous furrier who had no equal in the Caucasus, all these embellishments bound him to perform a feat of valour, a unique kind of feat. They set a barrier between him and the rest; between him and the soldiers who stood at attention before him, between him and the other officers who lacked his knowledge and experience, and as he strolled along so slim and straight he felt the weight of his loneliness.

"Eh! you there!"

His orderly, a young Georgian with irregular features, open yellow face, and liquid black eyes like his colonel's, ran up and saluted.

"Yes, sir?"

It was on the tip of the colonel's tongue to say, "Bring that Greek girl..."

But he did not say it and gave the orderly a stern look instead.

"Supper ready?"

"Yes, sir. The officers are waiting."

The colonel majestically passed by the soldiers who jumped up and stood at attention. Their faces were thin. Transport supplies had been stopped and the soldiers were starved on only a handful of maize per day. They saluted, followed the colonel with their eyes, whereas he negligently flicked a white glove with his fingers half in it. He passed by the fires, which gave out blue smoke and burned low as always in the evenings, past the battery's picket-line, by the stacked rifles of the infantry, and entered a long white tent in which a dazzling table loaded

with bottles, plates, glasses, caviar, cheese, and fruit stretched from end to end.

Talk at once died out among the groups of officers who, young as their colonel, were equally smart, in tight-wasted, Circassian coats. All stood up.

"Let's have our supper, gentlemen," said the colonel, and all took their seats at the table.

When he was preparing for bed in his tent later on the colonel felt pleasantly dizzy. He stretched forth his legs for the orderly to pull off his well-polished patent-leather boots and thought:

"Why didn't I send for that Greek girl? But, well, after all, it was wiser not to do it."

XXV

The vast night swallowed up the mountains, cliffs, and the formidable precipice which in day-time yawned before the plateau. The dense forests at the foot of the precipice had also disappeared in the engulfing darkness. Not a thing could be seen.

Along the breastwork passed a sentry, himself as black as everything else in that velvety blackness. He slowly went ten paces, turned on his heel and walked slowly back. When he moved in one direction he dimly made out the outline of a machine-gun, when he moved in the opposite direction he felt the nearness of the precipice filled to its edge with impenetrable darkness. And the fact that this unseen sheer drop was there gave him a sense of security and assurance; it was too steep for even a lizard to climb.

With steady monotony he slowly made his ten forward paces, slowly turned, and went back again.

In his native village he had a small orchard and a small field of maize. There was Nina, his wife and in her arms little Sergo, his son. When he was leaving them, little Sergo had looked at him with his black plum eyes and then jumped in his mother's arms, stretched out his plump little arms and smiled, making bubbles with his toothless mouth. And when he took him from Nina, little Sergo had pressed his open mouth against his father's face, wetting him with his saliva. Now on the dark plateau he could see before him that sweet toothless smile and those bubbles.

Ten slow steps, the faintly outlined machine-gun, the slow return to the divined edge of the gaping precipice....

The Bolsheviks hadn't done him any wrong. But he's shoot at them from this height. A lizard could not crawl out on the high-road without being seen. The Bolsheviks had done away with their tsar, and the tsar had drained Georgia of its life strength. Served him right. In Russia, people said, the land had been given to the peasants. He sighed. He had been mobilised, and would shoot, when ordered to do it, at those yonder, beyond the cliffs....

And again, before his eyes sprang the vision of little Sergo's toothless smile and bubbles; his heart felt warm and, inwardly, he smiled, but his dark face remained serious.

Undisturbed, the night's stillness filled all space. He thought it must be near dawn, because the stillness had deepened. His head felt terribly heavy and began to bend lower and lower, and then jerked up again. The mountains were darker than the dark night. In the ragged spaces between twinkled solitary stars.

From the distance came the weird unfamiliar cry of a night bird. He had never heard such a cry in Georgia.

All seemed heavily weighted down by something, all was motionless, yet it floated towards him like an ocean of darkness. And in some way it seemed natural that all should be motionless and float towards him at the same time.

"Nina, you? ... and where's Sergo?"

He opened his eyes and found himself leaning against the breastwork, his head helplessly and shakily hanging on his chest. The last impression snatched from his dream floated before his eyes in the vastness of the night.

He tossed his head, and all became fixed. He peered suspiciously: the immovable obscurity, the dimly discernible breastwork, the edge of the precipice, the machine-gun, more felt than seen, were unchanged. Far away a bird cried. There were no such birds in Georgia.

He gazed into the distance—ragged blackness in the folds of which faintly twinkled the paling stars, scattered in a different pattern than when he last saw them. Before him an ocean of mute obscurity, hiding in its depths, as he well knew, impenetrable forests. He yawned and thought, "I must walk about, or else..." But the thought

remained unfinished; again motionless darkness, endless and unconquerable, began floating out from the precipice, and a nostalgic ache made him feel sick at heart.

He asked:

"Can darkness float?"

And somebody answered:

"It can."

But this answer was not shaped in words; it came as laughter from between toothless gums.

He felt momentarily struck by that toothless, soft mouth. He reached out his hand, and Nina dropped the head of the infant. The grey head rolled (he caught his breath) but stopped still at the very edge of the precipice. His wife was in wild terror—ah! ... but not with what had happened. Something else was making her distracted: in the diluted twilight—forerunner of dawn—multitudes of grey heads appeared at the edge of the precipice towards which they had probably rolled. They rose higher and higher, necks appeared and arms were flung out, shoulders were raised and a rusty, iron voice as if straining from between clenched jaws rent the stillness and numbness around.

"Forward! Attack!"

Intolerable roaring as of savage beasts shattered all things; the Georgian fired a shot, toppled to the ground, and with a pang of unutterable pain the child that had been jumping in its mother's embrace, flinging out its arms and making bubbles with its smiling mouth, which consisted of gums only, faded out.

XXVI

The colonel rushed out of his tent and ran desperately downhill towards the harbour. All around, leaping over rocks and fallen bodies, soldiers were running in the growing light of dawn. From behind him, pressing on his back came rolling an inhuman roar. Horses were breaking their halters and bolting in frantic stampede.

Springing over stones and bushes like an agile youth, the colonel went at such a pace that his heart would stop its furious pounding every now and again. In his mind's eye was the harbour ... the ships ... salvation. Keeping time with his rapid feet, thoughts flashed through his brain, or rather through his entire body.

"If only ... if only ... if only ... they don't kill me ... if only they'd give me quarter. I'd do anything for them ... tend their cattle, fowl ... wash their pots ... dig the earth ... cart the manure ... if only they'd grant me life ... if only they don't kill me.... Oh, Lord! Life is precious...."

But behind him, and on either hand, the solid, earthshaking tramping was terrifyingly close. And even more terrifying, filling the dying night, the fierce, swelling roar closed round him together with hoarse, breathless curses.

And as if to emphasise the terror of the roar, a dry cracking sound came every now and again: crack! crack! He realised that rifle butts were splitting skulls like nutshells. There were also short, gasping cries of agony: the bayonets doing their work.

He tore on, his teeth set desperately, hot breath gushing from his nostrils.

"To live ... if they'd only spare me ... I'll renounce my fatherland, my mother ... my honour ... love ... if only I'm granted life ... later on all could be regained ... but now ... to live, to live...."

All his strength seemed to be spent, but he drew his head into his shoulders, clenched his fists, tautened his dangling arms, and flew on with such terrified impetus that the wind whistled in his ears, and the madly rushing soldiers began to lag behind. Their agonised cries lent wings to the fleeing colonel.

Crack! Crack...!

But the harbour was now in full view ... the ships.... Oh! Salvation!

He ran up to the gangway and stopped for a second. Something was terribly wrong here, too—on the gangway, on the ships, ashore, on the pier. Crack! Crack...! It came from all sides.

He was dumbfounded. Here, too, was that relentless, brain-shattering roar and the sharp cracks. Here, too, screams of agony went up like flame and quickly died out.

He swung around and flew with still greater agility and speed away from the harbour. The sea's infinite blue expanse flashed for the last time at him from beyond the pier.

"To live ... to live!"

He flew past the low white houses that stared at him dispassionately out of their mute dark windows, towards the end of the town where stretched the high-road, white

and placid, leading to Georgia. Not to mighty Georgia, dispenser of world culture, not to the Georgia where he had been promoted colonel, but to dear, unique, native Georgia, where blossoming trees are so fragrant in spring and snow-capped mountains appear above wooded slopes, and it is so hot in summer; the Georgia of Tiflis with its gay main street and the foaming Kura. In Tiflis he used to run and play when he was a small boy.

"Oh, to live ... to live...!"

Now the houses were farther between, and interspersed with vineyards. The roar, that awful roar and the sounds of shooting were distant, they remained at the sea below.

"Saved!"

At that instant the streets filled with the clatter of galloping hooves, from round the corner horsemen appeared, and with them came rolling that same appalling deathly roar. The narrow blades of their swords swished in the air.

The former Prince Mikheladze, the Georgian ex-colonel, rushed back. "Help! Help!"

His breath squeezed right in his breast, he ran headlong down a street towards the heart of the town. Twice he banged on the gates, but they were tightly shut with iron bars. There were no signs of life: the inhabitants were monstrously indifferent to what was going on in the street.

Then he had a revelation: his only chance of life lay with the Greek girl. She was awaiting him, her shining black eyes full of pity. She was the only person on earth for him now. He would marry her, give her his land, his money, kiss the hem of her dress.

His head exploded into fragments.

What actually happened was that his head was split open by a flashing sword and his brains were dashed out.

XXVII

The heat was becoming fierce. A heavy fog hung over the town. The streets, squares, quays, the pier, yards, and the high-road were strewn with dead bodies. They lay in heaps in the most varied postures. Some had their heads twisted, others were without heads. Brains were splashed over the pavement like jelly. As in a slaughter-house, dark, clotted blood lay in pools along the houses and

stone fences, blood trickled through the cracks under the gates.

They lay in the ships, on the decks, and in the staterooms, holds, engine rooms. Men with fine chiselled faces and youthful moustaches. They hung motionless over the parapet of the embankment, and if you looked into the clear blue water, you could see many of them, peacefully lying on the slimy greenish stones, with shoals of grey fish swimming in mid-water above them.

From the heart of the town came rifle shots and the insistent rattle of a machine-gun; a company of Georgians mustered around the cathedral were dying heroically. But there, too, silence soon prevailed.

The dead lay neglected, and the living filled the town, streets, yards, quays. The outskirts, high-road, mountain-sides, and ravines were thickly covered with carts, people, and horses. Exclamations, shouts, laughter, a general uproar made the air alive.

Through these streets of the dead and of the living, Kozhukh rode.

"Victory, comrades, victory!"

And as if there had been no corpses strewn about, no blood standing in puddles, the boisterous answer rolled:

"Hur-rah!"

It echoed in the distant blue mountains and died far away beyond the pier, beyond the ships, and the bay in the humid blue.

In the marketplace, in the shops and stores, feverish activities were in full swing. Wooden boxes were burst open, rolls of fabrics were eagerly divided, linen, blankets, ties, eye-glasses, skirts were grabbed.

Sailors arrived in swarms, they were all over the place, strong and sinewy men in naval jackets, funnel-shaped trousers, and round caps with fluttering ribbons. They shouted uproariously.

"Row away!"

"Make fast!"

"Unload this shell!"

They made quick work of it. One man had adjusted on his head a beribboned and befeathered lady's hat and was tying a veil over his coarse face, another strutted about flaunting a silk parasol trimmed with lace.

The soldiers, in indescribable rags, with blistered, grimy feet, manifested a zestful acquisitiveness. They were more

keen on cotton-print and linen, bleached or unbleached, for their wives and children.

One of them had pulled out of a cardboard box a starched shirt. He spread it out, holding the sleeves well apart, and burst into laughter.

"Look, lads! A shirt!... but I'll be damned if it looks like one!"

He poked his head through it, like it was a horse collar.

"Why don't it bend? It's like wood!"

He stooped forward, then straightened himself up, staring down at his chest like a ram preparing to butt.

"God's truth, it won't bend! There are springs in it."

"Idiot, it's starch."

"What's starch?"

"Made from potatoes. The gents put it on their chests to make 'em stick out."

A tall gaunt fellow, his dark lean flesh showing through his rags, had secured a fashionable tail-coat. He examined it very carefully, then resolutely threw off his rags. When he was stark naked he thrust his long ape-like arms into the sleeves, which reached only to his elbows, and fastened the coat over his belly. He looked down at himself with a smirk.

"Now for a pair of trousers!"

He hunted eagerly, but with no success. All the trousers had been taken. Undaunted, he searched the linen department, got hold of a cardboard box from which he produced some unusual articles of clothing. He unfolded them and smirked again:

"Funny! Looks like a sort of trousers, but it's mighty thin. Fyodor, is this a new kind of trousers?"

But Fyodor had other fish to fry—he was hunting for cotton cloth for his wife and children. They had not a stitch on them.

The fellow in the tail-coat knitted his brows and resolutely drew on the thing over his long muscular legs, dirty and sunburnt. What he had put on spread in lacy frills high above his knees.

Fyodor looked round and rocked with laughter.

"Hey, boys, look at Opanas!"

Laughter shook the walls of the store.

"Those are women's bags!"

"So what? Isn't a woman a human being?"

"You can't go about like that. It's all split up and so thin it shows everything."

Opanas looked crestfallen.

"True. What idiots they must be to make pants this thin! Waste, I call it."

He shook the whole contents from the box, and began donning in succession six pairs of ladies' knickers. The lace frothed luxuriantly over his grimy knees.

All of a sudden the sailors pricked up their ears, stood still a moment and then dashed to the windows and doors. From outside came hooting and swearing, the beat of horses' hooves, the swish of whips on flesh. The soldiers, too, crowded to the windows. Across the market place sailors were running full tilt, doing their best to retain their loot. Cavalrymen, spurring on their horses, were dealing blows with their whips right and left, mercilessly, tearing the clothes on the sailors' backs, raising weals on their unprotected faces from which the blood spurted.

The fleeing sailors were glancing around like beasts at bay; finally, unable to stand the lashing any longer, they dropped their heavy loads and scattered in all directions.

XXVIII

A drum beat furiously. A bugle sounded.

Presently the marketplace was full of soldiers standing in ordered ranks with solemn faces. Their very solemnity threw into sharp relief the grotesqueness of their attire. Some were still clothed in their old sweat-soaked rags, others were wearing starched shirts open on their chests and were tied at the waist with pieces of string. Others wore ladies' night-gowns or bodices out of which their grimy necks, arms, and heads protruded incongruously. The file leader of the third company, a tall, gaunt, grim fellow, wore a tail coat next to his bare skin, with sleeves hardly reaching to his elbows. Above his bare knees rose clouds of white lace.

Kozhukh appeared with set jaws, his grey eyes ominously bright. He was followed by the commanders in fine Georgian fur caps and crimson coats. Silver-mounted and black-enamelled daggers shone at their belts.

Kozhukh allowed some minutes to elapse while his gimlet eyes studied the ranks.

"Comrades!"

His voice had the same sound of rusty iron as when he had cried in the night, "Forward! Attack!"

"Comrades, we are a revolutionary army, we fight for our children, wives, our old fathers and mothers, for the Revolution, and our own land. And who has given the land to us?"

He paused, as if waiting for a reply which he knew would not be given. The ranks were motionless and mute.

"Who gave us the land? The Soviet power. And what have you done? You have turned robbers, you loot!"

The silence was strained. The rusty iron voice went on:

"I, the commander of the column, order that every man guilty of looting, even if it's only a reel of thread, shall be punished with twenty-five lashes."

All stared intently at him. He was bedraggled, his trousers hung in shreds, his dirty slouched straw hat was battered out of shape.

"All those who have looted, whatever it is, take three paces forward!"

An instant of heavy silence in which nobody stirred.

Then suddenly the earth resounded ... one, two, three ... hollow, rhythmical steps. Only a few ragged men, in their original tatters, remained standing where they were. The men in front were dressed like scarecrows.

"All that's been taken in the town is common property; it shall be distributed to your wives and children. Put down on the ground in front of you what you have taken."

The men in the foremost rank began to lay in a heap before them rolls of cloth and linen, others divested themselves of their boiled shirts, bodices, and nightgowns, and stood with their naked tanned bodies displayed to view. The gaunt, raw-boned file leader in the evening dress and befrilled knickers also undressed and stood stark naked for all to see.

A cart full of long birch switches drove up.

Kozhukh said to the file leader:

"Down on your face!"

The man sank on all fours, then clumsily lay prone with his face in the heap of befrilled knickers, the sun baking his naked backside.

"Down, all of you!" came Kozhukh's rusty voice.

All lay prone, exposing their backs and posteriors to the fierce sun.

Kozhukh looked on stonily. These people, in rowdy crowds, had appointed him commander. These people had yelled at him, had shouted that he'd sold them for booze. They had abused him according to their mood.

There had been a time when they wanted to stab him with their bayonets.

And now there they were, naked, submissive, prone.

A thrill of strength and elation, like that which had borne him up when his ambition was bent on obtaining the rank of an officer, raised him now to an undreamed-of sense of power. But this was a different thrill; the ambition that now inspired him was of another quality; he would save, lead out to liberty, these prone men who were waiting to be flogged. Submissively they lay, but if he had ventured to suggest, "Mates, we're turning back to surrender to the Cossacks and officers," they'd have run their bayonets through his body.

Suddenly Kozhukh's rusty voice rent the air with the command:

"Dress!"

All jumped to their feet and began to put on again their boiled shirts and night-gowns; the file leader donned his evening coat and six pairs of knickers.

Kozhukh signalled with his hand, and two soldiers, their faces alight with relief, threw back into the cart the heap of unwanted switches. Then the cart drove slowly along the ranks, and all the men eagerly tossed into it their rolls of cotton-print, linen, satinette.

XXIX

Low red flames leapt in the velvet darkness, lighting up faces and bodies that looked as flat as if they had been cut from cardboard, the wheel of a cart, the head of a horse. The night was alive with voices, exclamations and laughter. Snatches of song rang out; someone played the balalaika; now and then an accordion struck up. Glowing fires here, there, and as far as the eye could see.

And the night was full of something else of which all were loath to think....

Over the town there was the halo of electric light.

The red glow of a cracking fire shone upon an old, familiar face. Hail, Granny Gorpina! Her husband lay on the ground on a sheepskin, silent. Around the fire sat soldiers, red lights playing over their faces, all of them from Granny Gorpina's village. Pots had been set to boil, but there was only water in them.

Granny Gorpina lamented:

"Oh, Lord and Mary, Mother of God, what a life this is! We have come all this way, and there's nothing to eat. Strange kind of new rulers we have, who can't give us bread. What kind of rulers are they? Anka is nowhere to be found, the old man won't walk...."

A chain of fires straggled along the highway.

By the fire, but out of its light, a soldier lay on his back, his arms flung above his head, his eyes fixed on the dark vault of the sky. But he was heedless of the stars. His soul in distress, he seemed to strive to remember something he could not get hold of. There he lay, arms flung above his head, pursuing some deep thought of his own, his youthful melancholy voice floating like a reverie:

Take you your little wife....

The water boiled bravely in the kettle.

Granny Gorpina could not hold her peace.

"Who has ever heard of such a thing? They have brought us here to perish. Water only swells your belly, however long you boil it."

"Look!" said the soldier, stretching out his booted leg towards the red glow of the fire. The boot was of English make and the riding-breeches above it brand-new.

At the next bonfire an accordion burst into a playful tune. The chain of fires, with its intervals of darkness, extended indefinitely.

"No Anka! Where can she be? What can she be after? You ought to give her a good shaking, old man, and pull her hair. There you lie like a log. Can't you talk to a body?"

Give me my pipe and baccy....

The soldier turned over on to his belly, his red face propped up on his hands. He stared into the fire.

The accordion was playing cheerily. Laughter, talk and songs sparkled in the night at the fires.

"They were all human beings, and each of them had a mother...."

He spoke at large in his youthful voice, and silence spread around, extinguishing the talk and laughter; all suddenly became aware of the heavy stench of putrefaction coming from the plateau where the dead bodies were most numerous.

An elderly soldier stood up to look at the youth who had spoken. He spat into the fire, which hissed momenta-

rily. The silence might have lingered, but for the sudden onrush of excited shouts.

"What's that?"

"Who's there?"

All heads turned in the direction whence a voice said:

"Get along, you rat!"

A small crowd of excited soldiers entered the disk of light around the fire; from the darkness appeared glimpses of red faces, upraised hands, bayonets. In their midst, and alien to the surroundings, glittered the golden straps on the shoulders of a slim Georgian, a mere lad in a tightly girded Circassian coat.

Like an animal at bay he stared at his captors with large, dark eyes that would have graced the face of a girl; on his long eyelashes drops of blood trembled like tears. It looked as if he were on the point of crying out, "Mamma!" But he spoke no word, and merely stared.

"He was hiding in a bush," a soldier cried excitedly. "Found him by chance. I went into the shrubs to relieve myself, and our boys yelled after me: 'Go farther away, you son of a bitch, farther away from here.' I got into the shrubs and saw something black. Thought it was a stone, felt with my hand. It was him. Well, I went for him with the butt of my rifle."

"Stab him, what are you waiting for!" cried a little soldier, ready to lunge with his bayonet.

"Stop! Wait!" shouted the people around. "You must report to the commander."

The Georgian lad said imploringly:

"I was mobilised ... mobilised ... couldn't do anything, I was sent here. I have a mother."

Fresh red tears hung from his eyelashes, trickling down from his broken head. The soldiers were standing around, their heads resting on the muzzles of their guns, their faces sullen.

The soldier lying on his belly and staring into the fire said:

"He's a boy, he can't be sixteen."

Several voices burst out at once:

"Who are you? A kulak? Our fight's with the Cadets, why do the Georgians get into our way? Who asked them to interfere? We fight Cossacks to the death and don't want any interference. If you poke your nose into our business, you'll lose your head."

From every side excited and angry voices were raised. People were coming up from other fires.

"Who's that?"

"Just a kid, the milk's still wet on his lips."

"To hell with him!"

A soldier swore obscenely and reached for the kettle. A commander came up. He threw a casual glance at the captive, swung round and said in a low voice so that the Georgian boy might not hear:

"Shoot him."

"Come along," said two soldiers gruffly, shouldering their rifles, and looking away from the Georgian.

"Where are you taking me?"

All three began to walk. From the darkness came the answer:

"To headquarters, for enquiry. You'll sleep there."

A minute later a rifle shot was heard. It rolled and echoed in the mountains and died away, but the night remained dazed by the sound. The two soldiers returned with averted eyes and silently sat down by the fire. The night seemed to brood over this last shot.

As if eager to drown its lingering echo, all began to talk at once, more loudly and with greater animation than before. Someone started playing a lively tune on the accordion and a balalaika twanged.

"...So we made our way through the forest and got to that rock, we felt that all was lost, that we couldn't climb up and couldn't get away. When the sun rose, we'd all be shot...."

"A bloody fix," said someone, and laughed.

"...we felt sure they were only pretending to be asleep, the sons of bitches, and would soon begin to pour lead into us. And from above there, ten riflemen could have wiped out both regiments, like so many flies. Well, we climbed, stepping on one another's shoulders and heads."

"And where was *batko*?"

"He was there, climbing with us. When we were almost at the top, with only fifteen feet of rock above us, the cliff stuck up like a wall. What could we do? Nothing! We all lost heart. Then *batko* snatched a rifle from a soldier, jammed the bayonet into a crack, and climbed up onto the rifle. And after him we all stuck our bayonets into cracks and hoisted ourselves up to the top."

"A whole platoon of our people drowned in the sea. We were jumping from stone to stone. It was dark. They

lost their foothold and toppled over, one after the other. All were drowned."

But try as they could to talk with animation, in the light of the fires, the surrounding darkness remained filled with something which all wanted to forget, and the deathly smell of putrefaction floated over with unremitting insistence.

Suddenly Granny Gorpina said, pointing with her finger:

"What can that be?"

All heads turned. In the black distance where they knew stood the mountain, smoking torches could be seen moving and flickering at different levels.

A familiar youthful voice spoke out of the darkness:

"It's our own soldiers and some of the local people taking away the dead bodies. They have been at it all day."

Silence fell.

XXX

Sunshine again. The sea was dazzlingly bright, the outlines of the mountains were a powdery blue. They seemed gradually to lower themselves as the high-road twisted up, higher and higher.

Far below, the town became a tiny white patch which gradually disappeared. The blue bay was framed with piers like straight pencil lines. The abandoned Georgian ships were like black dots. Pity the Red soldiers could not take them along.

Nevertheless, they had managed to secure abundant miscellaneous booty; now they had six thousand shells and three hundred thousand cartridges. Fine Georgian horses straining at their shiny black traces were drawing sixteen Georgian guns. Georgian carts were loaded with diverse war supplies: field telephones, barbed wire, and medicines. Ambulance carts were a welcome addition to the baggage train. No end of things had been taken, but two were lacking: wheat and hay.

Patiently the hungry horses plodded on, tossing their tired heads. The soldiers tightened their belts. But they were in good spirits, each of them now having two or three hundred cartridges in his belt. Sturdily they marched through the clouds of hot dust, under a canopy

of flies—the flies had become inseparable from the campaign. There was singing under the dazzling sun:

*There's a lot of vodka in the tavern,
Plenty of beer and mead....*

The carts, gigs, vans creaked along. Amid red pillows the heads of the emaciated children joggled.

People on foot made short-cuts to avoid the windings of the high-road. Along narrow paths, in single file, weary heads covered with thin old caps or battered, slouched hats of straw or felt, they proceeded, leaning on sticks. The women's feet were bare and their skirts ragged. They no longer needed to bother about their cattle or fowl straying—not a cow, pig, or chicken had survived. Hunger had even caused the dogs to disappear.

The endlessly winding stream of people resumed the uphill crawl amid arid rocks, along clefts and precipices in order to reach the top of the range and then again go down to the steppe where the food and forage would be abundant, where their own people awaited them.

*Let's forget our grief and troubles,
Let's all drink, let's all make merry....*

Toreador, attento, Toreador....

New records had been taken in the town.

Inaccessible peaks rose against the blue sky.

The small town, down below, lay in a blue haze. The contours of the bay were blurred. The sea rising like a blue wall disappeared behind the tops of the trees that bordered the high-road. Dust, heat, flies, landslides along the high-road, virgin forests—the kingdom of beasts.

In the evening an endless wailing drowned the creaking of the carts in the baggage train:

"Mamma ... I want to eat ... to eat ... eat...."

The mothers, their faces dark, peaked, bird-like, craned their necks and stared with inflamed eyes at the sharp bends of the ascending high-road as they hurried with bare feet beside the moving carts; they had nothing to say to their children.

Higher and higher they climbed. The forest became less dense and finally fell behind. Overhanging cliffs, deep gorges, huge towering rocks that seemed to be falling upon them.... Each sound, each beat of the horses' hooves, the creaking of wheels reverberated everywhere,

welling up and drowning out the chorus of human voices. Every now and then the column had to go round the carcasses of horses on the road.

Suddenly the heat abated. A wind started from the peaks. A grey twilight fell without warning. At once it became dark, and from the black sky torrents came pouring. It was not rain but a roaring flood that swept people off their feet and filled the swirling darkness with furious watery vortices. It burst from above, from below, from all sides. Water cascaded down the ragged clothing of the marchers, over their matted hair. The column lost its bearings; people, carts, and horses straggled, were cut off from one another by driving torrents, neither seeing nor knowing what was going on around them.

Somebody was swept away, somebody was screaming. But the screams were drowned in the storm's fury. The water rushed, the wind seemed to bring the sky and the mountain tops down upon the heads of the climbers. Or perhaps—who could tell?—the whole train, with its carts and horses, was being swept away....

"Help!"

"It's the end of the world!"

They cried out aloud, but it was as though they merely whispered through their quivering blue lips.

Some of the horses, helpless against the onrush of the torrent, fell into an abyss, dragging after them a cart full of children; the people behind struggled on believing that the cart was still in front.

In other carts the children buried themselves in the drenched pillows and rags.

"Mamma ... mamma ... daddy...!"

Their desperate screaming was unheard against the roaring torrent. Stones, invisible in the murk, crashed down from unseen crags. The wind screamed with a thousand voices as it emptied itself of water.

Suddenly the infinite blackness of the mad night was lit by a dazzling blue shimmer. The outlines of the distant mountains became clear and sharp, and so were the indentations of the overhanging cliffs, the edge of the precipice, the horses' ears ... it hurt one's eyes to look at them; and everything was deathly still in that madly quivering light. The slanting stripes of the downpour were motionless in mid-air, motionless were the foaming streams, motionless the horses, a foreleg raised; motion-

less the people in their interrupted march, the dark mouths open in unfinished speech, motionless the tiny bluish hands of the children amidst the soaked pillows. All was frozen still in the silent, spasmodic tremor of light.

It seemed as if this deathly blue tremor would continue through the night, but it disappeared as suddenly as it had come, having lasted a second.

The black vastness of the night engulfed everything, and suddenly, drowning the crazy din, the mountainside crashed open and out of its entrails rolled out a terrific roar seeming too big even for the vastness of the night to hold; it split into great rounded fragments that went on exploding and rolling in all directions, gaining strength as they rolled and filling all the abysses, gorges, and forests. People were deafened; the children lay as if they had been struck dead.

Baggage train, soldiers, guns, limber-chests, carts, refugees—all stood stock-still. People and carts surrendered to the fierce torrents, the wind, the roaring, the deathly quivering of the lightning. The energy of the marchers had been overtaxed. The horses were knee-deep in rushing water. There was no end or limit to the horrors of this mad night.

And in the morning the sun shone radiantly; the washed air was translucent, the blue mountains vaporous. The humans alone were black, their faces peaked, their eyes sunken; summoning the last reserves of their strength they helped the horses on the upward gradient. And the horses' heads were bony, their ribs stuck out like the hoops of barrels, and the hair on their hides was washed clean.

The casualties were reported to Kozhukh.

"It's like this, Comrade Kozhukh; three carts have been swept away, people and all, into the precipice. A gig has been smashed by a rolling boulder. Two men were struck by lightning. Two others from the third company are missing. Scores of fallen horses lie on the high-road."

Kozhukh gazed at the water-washed highway and at the craggy rocks.

"We shall not halt for the night," he said, "the march must be continued day and night. We must go on and on."

"The horses can't do it, Comrade Kozhukh. There isn't a handful of hay. When we went through forests we could give them leaves to eat, now there's only bare stones."

Kozhukh was silent for a moment.

"Go on without a moment's rest," he said. "If we stop, all the horses will perish. Write out the orders."

The mountain air was crystal pure, to breathe it was sheer joy, but for these tens of thousands of people the air held no fascination. They marched silently with lowered eyes beside the carts or guns, keeping to one side of the road. Dismounted cavalrymen pulled horses after them by their bridles.

All around were barren and wild cliffs, the gaping clefts as if awaiting their prey. Mist crept in the gorges.

The dark rocks and clefts echoed with the insistent, never-ending creaking of carts, the rumbling of wheels, the beat of hooves, rattling and clanking; the din, reverberating a thousandfold, waxed into a continuous roar. All moved in silence; if one had uttered a cry it would have been drowned in this huge noisy movement which stretched over tens of versts.

Even the little children did not cry or ask for bread. Their heads joggled listlessly. There was no need for the mothers to quieten them, and the mothers did not pet or soothe them, they walked beside the carts, intently gazing at the loops of the crowded high-road ascending into the clouds. Their eyes were dry.

When a horse stopped, an overwhelming, wild terror possessed those in the cart. With savage frenzy those around seized the wheels, put their shoulders to the cart, swished their whips frantically, shouted in almost inhuman voices, but their efforts, their desperate straining, was lost in all that eternal creaking, multiplied a thousandfold, of the countless wheels.

The horse would walk a pace or two, sway and drop in its tracks, breaking a shaft, and none could help it up again, its legs were stretched out stiff, its teeth bared, the light of day was no longer reflected in its purplish eyes.

The children would be seized out of the cart. The mother pushed furiously the older ones to make them walk and took the little ones in her arms and on her back. When there were too many, the mother left one, and sometimes two, of the smallest in the abandoned cart, and walked on with hard dry eyes, without looking back. Behind her walked other people, without looking, the moving carts going round the abandoned cart, the live horses shying away from the dead horse, the live children

passing by the abandoned live children—and that incessant, magnified creaking seemed to swallow up what had happened.

A mother who had carried her child for many miles began to sway, her knees sagged, the high-road, carts, and rocks floated in a mist about her.

"No, I'll never get there...."

She sat on a heap of rubble by the roadside and gazed at her baby which she rocked in her arms as the carts endlessly passed by.

Her baby's dark dry mouth was open. Its deep-blue eyes had a fixed gaze.

She was desperate.

"But I have no milk, my heart, my treasure, my little blossom!"

She covered with mad kisses this child who was her life, her only joy. But her eyes were dry.

The tiny dark mouth was rigid, and a white film crept over the gazing eyes. She pressed to her breast the small precious mouth, now growing cold.

"My little daughter, my little treasure, you shall not suffer any more, waiting for death to take you."

The little body in her arms slowly stiffened.

She made a hole in the rubble, lowered her treasure in it, took from her neck her baptismal cross and passed the sweat-drenched piece of tape over the heavy little head, threw some earth over the body, making the sign of the cross over it again and again.

People passed on without looking. The carts trailed by endlessly, and the multi-voiced, hungry creaking was echoed by the hungry rocks.

Far ahead, in the foremost ranks of the column, walked dismounted horsemen, dragging their tottering horses after them by the bridles. The horses' ears lopped like those of dogs.

The heat grew. Swarms of flies that had disappeared during the storm, sheltering under the carts, now made the air black and thick.

"Hey, boys! Why do you slink along like cats afraid to hold up your tails? Strike up a song!"

Nobody responded. All continued to step along slowly and wearily, the cavalymen dragging their horses after them.

"To hell with the lot of you. Turn on the gramophone, let it play...."

He rummaged in a bag for records, pulled out one at random, and began to spell out the words:

"'B-bi-bim, b-bo-bom' ... what the hell can that be? 'C-clo-owns ... who'll m-ma-make you l-laugh.' I wonder what that is! Well, play away!"

He wound up the gramophone that swayed on the back of a pack-horse and adjusted the record.

For a second or so his face expressed genuine amazement, then his eyes narrowed into slits and he grinned from ear to ear, showing every tooth in his head until he was rocking in a fit of infectious, uncontrollable laughter. Instead of singing a song the gramophone was sending out of its trumpet staggering peals of laughter. Two people were laughing, first one, then the other, then both together. Laughing in the most extraordinary way, sometimes thinly, like little boys when they are tickled, sometimes in roars so that everything around shook. They laughed choking and one could imagine them waving their arms helplessly; they laughed hysterically, like women in fits of nerves; they split their sides, sounding as if they could never stop.

The dismounted cavalrymen began to smile, glancing at the trumpet which could laugh so madly in all sorts of ways. A ripple of laughter spread in the ranks, people began to join in the merriment of the trumpet, and the laughter grew, swelling, rolling further and further away along the column.

It rolled down to the slowly marching infantry. There, too, the men laughed, ignorant of the cause that had released all this jubilation; they laughed because the laughter all around infected them, and, without check or restraint, the laughter was caught up by those in the rear.

"What the hell are they splitting their sides for?" people asked and themselves went off, waving their hands and wagging their heads in paroxysms of laughter.

The infantry laughed, and the baggage train laughed, the refugees laughed, the mothers laughed with mad terror lurking in their eyes; laughter had taken possession of people on a stretch of over fifteen versts and was shaking them to the incessant accompaniment of the hungrily creaking wheels amid those hungry rocks.

When this wave of laughter rolled down to Kozhukh, his face became the colour of tanned leather, then, for the first time in the campaign, it became white.

"What's that?"

His aide, trying to restrain the laughter that was shaking him, said:

"Who can tell! They've gone mad. I'll go and find out at once."

Kozhukh snatched the whip out of the aide's hand, gripped the bridle of his horse and clumsily got into the saddle. He lashed the horse's ribs without mercy. The gaunt animal slowly walked on with lopped ears while the whip cut it to the raw, and then it managed to break into a kind of jog-trot.

All around him was laughter.

Kozhukh felt the muscles of his own face twitch and resolutely clenched his teeth. At last he rode up to the laughing vanguard. Uttering a curse he brought his whip down upon the record with force.

"Stop that!"

The damaged record squeaked and became silent. And silence spread down the ranks extinguishing the laughter, leaving only the maddening, eternal creaking and rumbling which, echoing a thousandfold, filled the air. The sharp teeth of the hungry precipices went slowly by.

Somebody cried out:

"The pass!"

The high-road began to loop downward.

XXXI

"How many of them?"

"Five."

The forest, sky, and remote mountains floated desolately in the haze of heat.

"In a row?"

"Yes...."

The Kuban patrolman, sweat streaming down his face, did not finish, jerked down to the mane of his horse. Its sides were covered with foam, the flies maddened it, and it was tossing its head trying to pull its bridle from its rider's hands.

Kozhukh was sitting in a britzka with his aide and driver. Their faces were dusky-red as if they had just come from a steam bath. Save for the patrolman there was not a living soul around.

"How far is it from the high-road?"

The Kuban horseman pointed to the left with his whip.

"Ten or fifteen versts, beyond the copse."

"Is there a side road?"

"Yes."

"No Cossacks about?"

"No Cossacks. Our people have ridden twenty versts ahead, no smell of Cossacks. At the farms they say the Cossacks are digging trenches beyond the river thirty versts from here."

The muscles were working in Kozhukh's face, which had suddenly become calm and yellow again.

"Stop the vanguard, turn the whole column into the side road, and make all regiments, refugees, and baggage trains file past those five."

The Kuban rider bent slightly over the pommel of his saddle and said deferentially to show that he had no intention of breaking discipline:

"It will take us far out of our way. As it is, people are dropping on the road. It's hot, they have no food...."

Kozhukh's gimlet eyes piercing the quivering distance became thoughtful. Three days.... People's faces were sunken, there was a hungry gleam in their eyes. They had not eaten for three days. The mountains had been crossed but one must still drive on to get out of the barren foothills, to reach the villages and find food for the people and horses. And one had to make haste, one could not let the Cossacks entrench themselves, could not afford to lose a minute, could not make a detour of ten or fifteen versts.

He looked at the youthful face of the Kuban rider, black from the heat and hunger. His eyes flashed, and he said through clenched teeth:

"Turn the army into the side road and let them see what's there."

"All right."

The Kuban horseman adjusted his sweat-soaked Astrakhan cap, lashed his guiltless horse, which became at once forgetful of the heat, the swarms of flies, and began to prance, then turned and trotted briskly off along the high-road.

There was, properly speaking, no high-road, but, in its stead, eddies of grey-white dust that rose above the tree tops and disappeared in the hills beyond. And in those whirling eddies one could feel the presence of thousands of hunger-driven human beings.

Kozhukh's britzka, all the wooden fittings of which were scorchingly hot, went on with a grating rattle. From under

his seat the burning hot nose of a machine-gun peeped out.

The Kuban horseman rode into the thick stifling clouds. Nothing could be seen distinctly, but one could hear a host moving in ragged, straggling, weary, and broken ranks. Horsemen rode on, carts creaked. Sweat pouring down the dark faces put a dim gloss over them.

Nobody spoke, nobody laughed. They just moved along dragging their silence along with them. And that heavy, stifling silence seemed to hold in it the disorderly shuffling of weary feet, weary hooves and the dreary creaking of the carts.

The horses moved along with low-bent heads and drooping ears.

The heads of the children rocked listlessly in the carts at every jerk, and their bared white teeth glistened dimly.

"Water ... water...."

The choking white dust floated in the air, covering all, and in it moved the hidden ranks of the foot soldiers, in it rode the horsemen and the slow creaking carts. Perhaps this was not an implacable heat, not a floating white dust—but general despair pervading everything. Hope had fled, thought had been stifled, the inexorable alone remained. The iron bond forged between these people when they entered the narrow passage dividing the sea from the mountains and had been with them throughout, had now become a threatening rod. They were starved, barefoot, exhausted, ragged, tortured by the sun. And somewhere ahead were well-fed, fully armed, solidly entrenched Cossack regiments and rapacious generals.

The Kuban horseman rode through the dismally creaking, stifling clouds, calling out to know which units were passing.

Now and then the grey mist opened and in the rent quivered the outlines of the hills and the silent forest down the hazy blue sky. The sun blazed furiously and gleamed into the inflamed faces of the soldiers. But back again floated the mist, muffling the sound of shuffling feet, the irregular beat of hooves, the weary, hopeless creaking of the carts. Along the roadside, dimly discernible through the floating clouds, sat or lay the utterly exhausted, their heads thrown back, their parched, black mouths open, the flies swarming about them.

Stumbling against people and horses, the Kuban rider reached the vanguard, bent down and spoke to the commander. The latter frowned, glanced at the confused, moving mass which disappeared now and then in the mist, and shouted in a hoarse voice:

"Regiment ... halt!"

The stifling dust muffled his words, but they nevertheless reached the ears of those for whom they were meant and, fading in the distance, orders were shouted in various accents:

"Battalion, halt!"

"Company, halt!"

Then very far away a barely audible "Halt!" hung in the air and died out.

At the head of the column the stamping of feet stopped, and in quiet waves the cessation of all movement spread. In the obscure, furnace-hot mist came a moment when there fell utter quietness—the unfathomable quietness of endless exhaustion and submission to the heat. Then the men suddenly began to blow their noses, to cough up the stifling dust, to swear. They rolled themselves cigarettes of grass and leaves. The dust settled upon their faces, upon the heads of the horses, and upon the carts.

Some sat down on the banks of the ditches along the high-road, holding their rifles between their knees. Others lay on their backs, in the blazing sun.

The horses stood limply, with their heads down, submissive even to the plague of flies.

"Up! Get up!"

Nobody stirred. On the high-road people, horses, and carts remained where they were. It looked as if no force on earth could raise these people weighted with the heat—they were like a heap of stones.

"Get up! What the devil do you think you're doing?"

They rose one by one, by twos and threes, as if they had heard their death sentence; they did not fall into any kind of formation. Neither did they wait for a command; they wearily plodded on again, shouldering their heavy rifles and looking ahead with inflamed eyes.

They straggled along in the middle of the high-road, along the bordering banks and the slopes of the hills. The carts resumed their eternal creaking, and the clouds of flies again gathered overhead.

The whites of eyes gleamed in charred faces. Instead of hats the marchers wore on their heads to protect them against the broiling sun burdock leaves, twigs, ropes of twisted straw. Their feet were bare, torn, black. Some were stark naked, black as Negroes, with just a rag dangling in strips about their loins. Their dry, emaciated sinews protruded from under their black skin as they tramped on, their heads thrown back, carrying their rifles on their shoulders, their eyes screwed up to tiny slits, their parched mouths open. A dishevelled, bedraggled, black, naked horde, followed by the merciless heat, bearing with them hunger and despair.

Suddenly the unexpected command rang out.

"Left turn!"

Each unit as it came up heard in bewilderment:

"Left turn ... left ... left...."

They ran down to the side road first in amazed and then in willing crowds. The side road was stony, there was no dust on it, and one could see the units hurriedly turning down into it, the cavalry, then the creaking, heavily swaying baggage train, the gigs. A wide vista opened, copses, glades, and blue mountains. The crazy sun still quivered in a fever of heat. The flies in thick, black swarms also took the side road. The slowly settling clouds of dust, the stifling silence were left behind, the cross-road became alive with voices, exclamations, laughter.

"Where are they taking us?"

"Perhaps into a forest, to wet our parched throats a little."

"Idiot! They've got a feather-bed in the woods for you to stretch yourself out upon."

"They've got dumplings with cream."

"And butter."

"Thick clotted cream."

"And honey."

"And a cool water-melon."

A tall, bony man in a tattered, sweat-soaked evening coat and remnants of dirty white lace that covered nothing, spat angrily.

"Shut your yapping. Shut up!"

He tightened his belt fiercely, drew in his belly to his ribs, and wrathfully changed his rifle from one bruised shoulder to the other.

Bursts of laughter disturbed the cloud of flies.

"Opanas, why have you covered your behind and left your front exposed? Turn your pants around else the women in the village won't give you anything to eat—they'll look the other way when you come up."

"Ha—ha—ha! Ho—ho—ho!"

"Boys, this means we're going to camp."

"But there are no villages here, I know."

"You can see telegraph posts going down from the high-road. They must lead to some village."

"Hey, cavalry! You must earn the bread you eat. Give us some music!"

From a pack saddle on the back of a horse the gramophone sent out huskily:

*Whither have you gone,
You golden days of spring?...*

The words floated in the torrid air, choked with wavering black clouds of flies, over the tired but cheerily marching crowd. The people were caked in white dust, ragged, naked, and the sun glared at them with studied indifference. Their legs felt as if molten lead had been pumped into them; but a man lifted his high, creaking tenor voice in a song:

The good housewife knew it well....

His voice broke—his dry throat could not manage it. Other hoarse, cracked voices took up the song:

*What the soldier wanted,
She only waited for the drum,
Till it came a-drumming,
Till it came....*

The words mingled incongruously with "Whither have you gone, you golden days of spring?..."

"Look, there's our *batko*!"

All turned their heads to look. Yes, there he was, unchanged, stocky, sturdy, his battered grimy straw hat making him look like a mushroom. He watched them. One could see his hairy chest through the rents in his sweat-sodden tunic. His trousers were in rags and his blistered feet almost bare.

"Boys, our *batko* is like a bandit. If you met him in the forest, you'd run away from him!"

They gazed at him lovingly and laughed.

He watched the ragged, weary, noisy crowd as it passed him, and his small observant eyes shone in his grim face.

"They're just a horde," he thought. "If the Cossacks attacked us now, all would be lost. They're just a horde!"

*Whither have you gone,
You golden days of spring?...*

"What's that? What's that?" The crowd began anxiously to ask, forgetting all about "housewife" and the "golden days of spring".

They were silent, only the tramping of feet was heard; all heads turned, all eyes gazing in the one direction, towards the straight line of the telegraph posts which dwindled into the distance, the last of them being no taller than pencils. From the four nearest posts four naked men were hanging. The air around them was black with flies. Their heads were bent low, as if they were pressing down with their youthful chins the nooses that had strangled them; their teeth were bare, the empty sockets of their eyes, which the ravens had pecked out, were black. From their bellies, also pecked and torn, the greenish and slimy entrails hung. The sun glared. The skin on their sides and legs was broken and bore black scars where they had been scourged with ramrods. At the approach of the crowd the ravens flew off a little and alighted on the tops of the posts, looking down sideways.

Four men ... and there was a fifth figure, naked, that of a girl, the breasts cut off and the body already turned black.

"Regiment, halt!"

To the first post a sheet of white paper had been nailed.

"Battalion, halt!"

"Company, halt!"

The order was passed along the whole column, its resonance dying out in the distance.

From those five descended silence and the faintly sweet smell of putrefaction.

Kozhukh took off his battered hat. Those who possessed hats also doffed them. Those who were hatless removed the protecting straw, grass, or twigs rolled about their heads.

The sun glared.

The faintly sweet, nauseating smell became palpable.

"Comrade, give me that," said Kozhukh.

The aide tore off the sheet of white paper nailed beside one of the dead men and handed it to him.

Kozhukh clenched his jaws and spoke, flourishing the paper.

"Comrades, this is what the general wished to convey to you. General Pokrovsky writes: 'All persons guilty of having any kind of intercourse with the Bolsheviks shall be as ruthlessly executed as these five scoundrels from the Maikop works.'" He clamped his jaws shut. After a short pause he added, "Your brothers ... and your sister...."

Here he shut his mouth upon the words that he would have uttered. Words, he felt, would be useless.

Thousands of fevered eyes stared unblinkingly. A single heart, superhumanly huge, was beating loudly.

From the empty eye-sockets black drops were falling.

The fetid stench floated in the air.

The ringing in the torrid air, the buzzing of the swarms of flies gave way to stillness. Graveyard stillness and the fetid smell. Black drops kept falling.

"Fall in! March!"

The pounding of heavy feet broke the silence; it filled the torrid day with a new rhythm that was like the advance of a solitary man of inconceivable height and immeasurable weight and the beating of a superhumanly big heart.

They marched unaware of the quickening in their heavy resounding steps, unaware that they were marching with a swing. The sun glared down cruelly.

In the first platoon a man with a little black moustache staggered, dropped his rifle and fell down heavily. His purple face swelled, the veins in his neck became taut, and the pupils of his eyes rolled up under his open eyelids exposing red balls. The sun stared down at him.

Nobody stopped, nobody slackened his pace—all went on still more swingingly, as though in a hurry, looking ahead with shining eyes, looking into the torrid, rippling distance.

"Stretchers!"

A gig drove up, and the man was lifted into it. The sun had killed him.

Presently another man fell, then two others.

"Stretchers!"

Then came the command.

"Cover your heads!"

Those who had hats put them on. Some opened ladies' parasols. Those who had nothing snatched handfuls of dry grass as they went and improvised some sort of head covering. Without stopping they tore from their bodies

their sweaty tattered clothes, gritty with dust, slipped off their trousers, tore them to pieces, made kerchiefs of them, tying them around their heads as women do, and marched on, with mighty swinging strides, devouring the high-road that stretched under their bare feet.

Kozhukh wanted to catch up with the van of the column in his britzka. The driver, his eyes popping out lobster-fashion from excessive heat, whipped the horses, leaving sweaty stripes across their cruppers. The foam-flecked animals broke into a trot but to no avail—the ponderous ranks went ever faster and with a greater swing.

"They must be mad. Scampering like hares!"

He lashed his spent horses anew and jerked at the reins.

"Fine, my lads, fine!" Kozhukh thought, looking at them from under his heavy brows, his eyes the colour of blue steel. "At that rate we'll make seventy versts a day."

He got down and marched, straining every muscle not to lag behind the others and was soon lost in the briskly marching endless ranks.

The telegraph posts, solitary and naked, disappeared into the distance. The head of the column turned to the left onto the high-road and was once more enveloped in its stifling clouds of dust. One could see nothing. The heavy, rhythmical, measured beat of footsteps filled the smothering clouds that rolled hurriedly forward.

To those first gruesome telegraph posts other units came up in turns. Each halted.

The stillness of the grave likewise fell upon them. The commanders read out the general's paper. Thousands of fevered eyes stared unblinkingly. A single heart, superhumanly huge, began to beat.

Those five up there, motionless. Under the nooses their black flesh decomposed, the bones showing white.

On the tops of the posts the ravens look sideways with shining eyes. The air is permeated with the heavy, sweet, nauseating smell of roasted flesh.

The measured tramp of the feet of those other units likewise beats faster and faster. Unconsciously, without awaiting a command, they, too, fell into serried ranks and marched on, their heads bare, seeing no longer the telegraph posts that stretched so orderly in the distance, heedless of the short, sharply black noon shadows, fixing their eyes ahead on the remote torrid shimmer.

Then came the command: "Cover your heads!"

They marched quicker and quicker, ever more swingingly in solid ranks, turning to the left and pouring themselves back into the high-road, being again swallowed in clouds of dust that rolled on together with them.

Thousands, tens of thousands, passed. There were no longer any platoons, companies, battalions or regiments, there was one huge, motley mass. It moved with numberless steps, looked with countless eyes, beat with one immense heart.

And all as one man kept their unwavering glance fixed on the torrid distance.

Long slanting shadows fell. A blue mist blurred the mountains. The weary sun, no longer fierce, had sunk behind them. The carts, open or hooded, full of children and wounded, dragged heavily on.

They were stopped for a minute and told:

"Your own kith and kin.... See what the general did...."

They moved on, and nothing but the creaking of wheels was to be heard. The children asked in frightened whispers:

"Mamma, will the dead come to us in the night?"

The women crossed themselves, blew their noses in their skirts, wiped their eyes, and said:

"Poor lads, poor girl!"

Old people walked beside the carts. Everything became uncertain. There were telegraph posts no longer; instead in the darkness stood huge pillars supporting the sky. And the entire sky broke into innumerable twinklings, but it did not send down more light. It seemed as if the mountains were back again; but, in truth, these were only hills, the great peaks having already been screened away by the night; and all around one felt the expanding of the unknown, mysterious plain on which anything might happen.

And suddenly a woman shrieked so loudly that the stars seemed to shy away to one side of the sky.

"Oh, oh, oh, what have they done to them.... The beasts ... the madmen! Help! Kind people, look at them!"

She clutched a post, embraced the cold feet, pressed against them the young tresses of her dishevelled hair.

Strong hands forced her from the post and dragged her to a cart. She twisted herself free, rushed again to embrace the putrid corpses and again shrieked out in the mad night.

"Where is your mother? Where are your sisters? Did you not wish to live? Where are your clear eyes, your strength, your living speech? Oh, you poor creatures, you unfortunates! There is nobody to mourn by you, nobody to sorrow over you, nobody's tears to fall upon your bodies...."

Again people held her, again she writhed free and shrieked in the mad night:

"What have they done.... They've eaten my son! They have eaten my Stepan, they have eaten you! Devour us all at once, blood and flesh, devour us, and choke, fill your bellies with human flesh, bones, eyes, and brains...."

"Come on, stop that!"

The carts creaked on. Her cart also had moved away. Other people seized her, but she tore herself free from them, and again her screams rent the mad night.

Only the rear-guard, when passing, overpowered her. They tied her to the last cart, and moved on.

And behind them they left desolation and the smell of putrefaction.

XXXII

Where the high-road left the mountains the Cossacks were waiting. Ever since the revolt swept over the whole of the Kuban land, everywhere the Bolshevik forces had retreated before the Cossack regiments, the units of officer volunteers, the Cadets; nowhere had they been able to entrench themselves and check the frenzied onslaught of the generals. They surrendered town after town, village after village.

At the beginning of the revolt, part of the Bolshevik forces had slipped out of the iron ring of the rebels and fled in a huge disorganised horde with thousands of refugees and thousands of carts along the narrow strip between the sea and the mountains. Their speed had been such that they could not be caught. But now the Cossack regiments were lying low and waiting for them.

The Cossacks had been informed that the horde that was pouring across the mountains carried with them incalculable treasures which they had looted: gold, precious stones, clothes, gramophones, innumerable arms and war supplies, notwithstanding that their heads and feet were bare and their bodies clothed in rags, this fact merely being evidence of their addiction to vagrancy and disorderly living. The mouths of both the generals and

the rank-and-file Cossacks watered in anticipation. Of itself all this wealth was heading into their hands.

General Denikin entrusted General Pokrovsky with the task of forming military units in Ekaterinodar to surround the horde as it came down from the mountains. Not a single man was to be allowed to escape alive.

Pokrovsky formed an excellently equipped corps and barred the road along the Belaya River*, so named because of the foam borne down from the mountains. One detachment he sent to meet the horde.

The Cossacks, their caps set at a devil-may-care angle, rode gayly on sturdy, well-fed and well-groomed horses that tossed their heads, impatient of restraint. Their finely tempered swords rattled and glittered in the sun; the skirts of their Circassian coats, tightly belted, swayed gracefully, and they had white ribbons on their fur caps.

They sang as they rode through the villages, and Cossack women presented them, their men in service, with baked and roasted meats, while the old men rolled out barrels of wine for them.

"Bring us one Bolshevik, at least, just for us to look at; we want to see what he's like, fresh from beyond the mountains."

"We'll bring you some all right. Get a gallows ready for them."

The Cossacks were good at drinking and wielding their swords.

In the distance gigantic clouds of white dust swirled.

"Aha! There they are!"

Yes, there they were—ragged, grimy, in hanging tatters, with grass and straw instead of hats.

The Cossacks adjusted their fur caps, drew their sabres which flashed with a short vibrating sound, bent towards the pommels of their saddles and gave rein to their horses, the wind singing in their ears.

"They'll know what a Cossack can do with a sword!"

"Hurrah!"

But all in a few minutes something monstrous and unexpected happened; the Cossacks charged, grappled, and began to fall from their horses with slashed fur caps and gashed necks or else both horses and riders were bayoneted. The survivors turned their horses and galloped away, bending so low that they could not be seen, and

* *Belaya* means white in Russian.— *Tr.*

the wind whistled louder still in their ears, but they were picked off their horses by singing bullets. The barefooted cavalry pressed on in pursuit for two, three, five, ten versts—if the Cossacks escaped it was only because the horses of their enemy were spent.

The Cossacks careered through the village. But those others also burst into it and began to snatch fresh mounts, and mow with their swords right and left such as refused to give them horses from their stables. Then again they were off in pursuit and many Cossack caps with their white ribbons rolled over the steppe, many Circassian coats, held at the waist by silver and black enamelled belts, made dark patches on the blue mounds, in the yellow stubble, and in the copses.

Only when they reached their entrenchments did the remaining Cossacks wrest themselves from pursuit.

The naked and barefoot infantry, that had come down from the mountains, rushed after their squadrons. Guns began to boom, machine-guns rattled.

Kozhukh considered it unwise to deploy his army in the day-time. He knew the enemy had a considerable advantage in numbers, and he did not wish to disclose to them the size of his own forces. He would wait till dark. And in the dead of night a repetition of the day's event took place: not men, but devils, rushed the Cossack positions. The Cossacks hacked and jabbed with sword and bayonet, mowed down rows of them with machine-guns; nevertheless, the Cossacks soon began to melt, their heavy guns boomed less frequently and shot out fewer fiery tongues, their machine-guns rattled at longer intervals, and at last their rifles became silent.

Then the Cossacks fled. The darkness did not save them. They fell in rows from the swords and bayonets. Then they straggled, each shifting for himself, abandoning artillery, machine-guns, munitions; in the dark they scattered through the copses and ravines, bewildered by the diabolical force that made a mock of them.

And when the sun rose above the hills and over the limitless steppe it shone upon many Cossacks with long black moustaches. There were no wounded, no prisoners among them—they all lay dead.

In the baggage train at the rear the refugees had kindled fires and were cooking food in kettles. The horses

were munching hay and oats. In the distance cannon were roaring; nobody heeded the noise, because they had become accustomed to it. When it ceased, people from the front began to trickle in: a mounted orderly carrying instructions, a forager, a soldier surreptitiously visiting his family. From all sides women with dark, tortured faces would rush towards the man, clutching at his stirrups or bridle:

"How is my man?"

"Is he alive?"

Their eyes implored, full of horror and hope.

And the man would go at a jog-trot, slightly waving his whip and dropping his news to the women as they approached:

"Alive ... he's alive ... wounded ... wounded ... killed, they're bringing him here."

He passed; some women with joyous faces would make the sign of the cross, others would wail and lament or give a gasping sigh and fall senseless to the ground, and those around would pour water over their faces.

When wounded men arrived at the camp their mothers, sisters, neighbours, and sweethearts attended to them. When the bodies of the dead were brought in, the women, convulsively sobbing, flung themselves upon them and their prolonged lamentations and despairing cries were heard far over the plain.

Mounted men at once started in quest of a priest.

"Can't let them be buried like dumb beasts, without crosses and incense."

The priest raised objections and said that his head ached.

"Aha! Your head aches, does it? You don't wish to come? Well, here's some medicine for your backside."

They gave him a taste of their horsewhips. The priest jumped up with alacrity, thoroughly willing. Told to put his vestments, he poked his head through the wide opening of a black chasuble with white braid—it stuck out around him as if on hoops—and put on an appropriate stole. He pulled his long hair out from beneath it. He was then ordered to take a cross, thurible, and incense.

They hunted out a deacon, a huge, alcoholic fellow. He too donned vestments for a funeral service. His face was red. The sexton was a lean man.

When they were ready they were told to march. The horses of the soldiers ambled. Priest, deacon, and sexton

had to step briskly. The horses tossed their heads, and the horsemen flourished their whips.

Behind the refugee camp in the shaded cemetery an enormous and expectant crowd had gathered. When they saw the approaching messengers they cried:

"Look, look! They're driving a priest along."

The women began to cross themselves.

"Thank God, they'll have a decent funeral."

"Look, they've brought a deacon and a sexton, too."

The soldiers added:

"Isn't the deacon's a fine fellow? His belly's like a boar's."

The three came up hastily, out of breath, sweat streaming from their faces. The sexton quickly kindled the coals in the thurible. The dead lay with their hands across their chests.

"Blessed be the Lord...."

The deacon intoned wearily in a low voice while the sexton mumbled rapidly, speaking through his nose:

"Holy God, holy and mighty...."

Blue smoke rose in a narrow ribbon from the thurible. The women shook with half-stifled sobs. The dark emaciated faces of the soldiers were stern. They could not hear the words of the service.

The Kuban horseman who had brought the priest sat bareheaded on a big sorrel horse. He touched the beast, which went forward a step or two; bending towards the priest, he said in a loud whisper which everybody heard:

"If you go on singing like a starved pig, I'll flay you alive."

The priest, deacon, and sexton eyed him in horror.

The deacon at once began to sing the service in a thundering bass which sent the ravens fluttering noisily into the air from all corners of the cemetery; the priest joined in zestfully in a high tenor, and the sexton, standing on tiptoe, turned up his eyes and chanted falsetto tremolos.

"Rest with the saints...."

The Kuban rider backed his horse and sat in his saddle with knit brows, immovable as a statue. Everybody began to make the sign of the cross and to bow low from the waist.

When the earth was being thrown into the graves three

salvoes were fired. The women blew their noses, wiped their tear-filled eyes, and repeated:

"The priest sang a beautiful service, put his whole heart into it."

XXXIII

The night swallowed the huge expanse of steppe, the hills, the accursed mountains which had loomed blue on the horizon during the day, and the village on the enemy side; there was not a single light, or a sound there: the village might not have existed. Even the dogs were silent from the fright the day-time cannonade had given them. Only the river was noisy.

All day long, from beyond the now invisible river, from behind the Cossack trenches, the shattering booming of guns had been coming. The firing had been continuous, the shells used unsparingly; innumerable white puffs bursting over the steppe, in the orchards and gullies. The response to them had been meagre, weary, reluctant.

"—Ah—Ah—Ah!" the Cossack artillerymen had repeated with malicious exultation. "It gets them on the raw."

Then they had again loaded the guns, taken aim, and a fresh shell had sung through the air.

The position seemed plain to the Cossacks: the other side was spent, weak, already they no longer responded shot for shot. In the later afternoon the ragamuffins had attempted an attack from beyond the river, but they had got it hot—their ranks broke, they hid where they could. Pity the night had fallen, else they would have been minced up. Well, there was the morning to look forward to.

The river clamoured, it filled the darkness with sound. Kozhukh felt pleased, his tiny eyes had hard, steel-like glints in them: in his hands the army was an obedient, pliant instrument. Before sundown he had sent a regiment forward with instructions to make a weak attack and then to lie low. And as he made his night's round in the velvety darkness, all were at their posts, above the river; and beneath the fifty-foot precipice the water was roaring, and its roaring brought back the memory of that other noisy river, and that other night when everything had started.

Each soldier crept through the darkness, felt with his hands the edge of the precipice, estimated its depth. All these prone soldiers knew their places which they had

examined well. They did not wait like sheep to be told what to do by commanders.

Rain had been falling in the mountains; in the day-time the river had rushed along foaming; now it was roaring. The soldiers knew that now the river was five or six feet deep—they had already contrived to make sure of that; in places they would have to swim; that was nothing, it could be done. Before dark, when they had been lying in dips, hollows, bushes, and the tall grass, under incessant shrapnel fire, each had chosen the particular bit of the enemy trench he was to attack.

To the left two bridges spanned the river: an iron railway bridge and another of wood. Neither could be seen in the darkness. The Cossacks had trained their cannon on them and set a machine-gun beside—these also were invisible.

And in the depth of the night so full of the noise of the water, regiments of cavalry and infantry were standing motionless by Kozhukh's orders opposite the bridges. Only the noise of the invisible running water monotonously filled the vast starless, soundless vacancy of the dark.

The Cossacks sat in their trenches; they listened to the sound of the rushing water without putting down their rifles although they knew that the barefoot horde would not venture to cross the river at night—they had been punished enough. The Cossacks waited. The night flowed on slowly.

The soldiers lay like badgers at the edge of the precipice; their heads hung over it in the dark as they listened together with the Cossacks to the noise of the rushing water and waited.... That for which they waited and which seemed never to come, drew on: slowly and with reluctance the dawn began to break.

Nothing could be discerned yet—neither colours nor outlines, but the darkness was changing, acquiring a translucent quality. The pre-dawn vigil was languid.

Something elusive ran along the left bank, like an electric spark, or a silent covey of swallows.

From the fifty-foot height, as from a sack, soldiers scrambled down together with fragments of crumbling clay, sand and pebbles. The river roared on.

Thousands of bodies made thousands of splashes, thousands of splashes muffled by the voice of the river. The river roared on, in a continuous monotone....

A forest of bayonets grew into shape before the amazed Cossacks in the dawn's grey dusk; activity suddenly seethed with a roar, with groans and curses. There were no longer human beings but interlocked bloody beasts swarming there. The Cossacks struck them down in scores and themselves fell in hundreds. The diabolic force, come whence none could tell, once more crashed against them. Could these be the Bolsheviks they had pursued over the Kuban land? No, these were different. And they were black and naked and in rags.

Immediately the savage uproar broke out on the right bank of the river, the artillery and machine-guns began to rain lead, over the heads of their own ranks, on the village and a cavalry regiment charged furiously across the bridges, followed by panting infantry. The Cossack cannon and machine-guns were seized, and squadrons poured into the village. In the murk of dawn the soldiers saw something white flash from a hut and disappear with desperate speed on an unsaddled horse.

The huts, poplars, the dimly white church, all were emerging more and more distinctly from the twilight. Beyond the orchards the dawn was rose-tinted.

From the priest's house people with ashen faces and golden shoulder-straps were being led—part of the Cossack headquarters' staff had been taken. Their heads were split open in the yard near the priest's stable, and blood soaked the dung.

The din of the firing, the shouts, curses, and groans drowned out the noise of the river.

The house of the village ataman was searched from basement to attic—he was nowhere to be found. He had fled. Then the soldiers called out:

"If you do not show yourself we'll kill your children."

The ataman did not appear.

They began to slaughter the children. The ataman's wife crawled on her knees, with streaming hair, clinging to the soldiers' legs. One of them said, his voice heavy with reproach:

"Why're you yelling bloody murder? I also had a three-year-old daughter, just like yours. We buried her up there in the mountains, but I didn't yell."

He slashed at the little girl and then split open the skull of the wildly laughing mother.

Near a hut with shattered glass strewn on the earth a group of railwaymen had gathered.

"General Pokrovsky slept here. You just missed him. When he heard you, he knocked the window out, jumped in his shirt and without any trousers upon an unsaddled horse, and galloped away."

A cavalryman said grimly:

"Why hadn't he got pants? Had he been bathing?"

"He had been sleeping."

"What! Sleeping without his pants! How is that possible?"

"Gents always do. Doctors recommend it."

"The vermin! They can't even sleep like human beings."

The cavalryman spat and strode off.

The Cossacks had fled. Seven hundred of them lay in heaps in the trenches and in a long line across the steppe. The dead alone. And those who fled, even as they strained to save themselves, marvelled at this satanic force which had overwhelmed them.

But two days previously this Cossack village had been occupied by the main Bolshevik forces. The Cossacks had dislodged them with a rush, had pursued them, and were even now pursuing them. From where then had these come? Was Satan himself their ally?

The sun, rising over the far horizon of the steppe, blinded the pursued with low, slanting rays.

The baggage train and the refugees spread far over the steppe, in the groves and the undulations of the plain. Again there was blue smoke over the fires, again one saw the scarcely human sight of children's bony little heads on necks too thin to support them. Again, on white Georgian tents spread upon the ground, dead men lay with crossed arms, and beside them were prostrate women—other women this time—hysterically beating the earth and tearing their hair.

Soldiers crowded around some horsemen.

"Where are you going?"

"To get a priest."

"Kozhukh ordered that the band captured from the Cossacks should play."

"What's the good of a band? It's only a lot of brass trumpets, whereas the priest's got a live throat."

"What the devil do we want with his live throat? His voice gives you the belly-ache. Anyway, the band is a military unit."

"The band! The band!"

"A priest! A priest!"

They wrangled over the band or the priest with much cursing. The women got wind of the dispute and ran up, crying frantically:

"A priest! A priest!"

Young soldiers also ran up, clamouring:

"The band! The band!"

Eventually, the band got the upper hand.

The horsemen began to dismount.

Refugees and soldiers went in solemn procession behind the band which lifted its brazen voices to the brazen sky expressing sorrow and strength.

XXXIV

The Cossacks were beaten, but Kozhukh did not move, although to advance was imperative. Scouts and friends among the local population reported that the Cossacks were again concentrating and organising themselves; that reinforcements were constantly arriving from Ekaterinodar: rumbling batteries were being drawn up; battalions of officers were marching menacingly in serried ranks, new Cossack hundreds were continually coming up—things looked very threatening indeed around Kozhukh. A huge force was accumulating. It was necessary to get away. It was vital. There was still a possibility of breaking through, the main forces were still not too far off, but Kozhukh did not move.

He had no heart to abandon the columns which had lagged behind. He knew they were weak, that if left to their own resources they would be destroyed. And their destruction would besmirch what honour the future held for Kozhukh as the saviour of many thousands of people.

He waited while the Cossacks rallied their army; the iron encirclement was being effected with irresistible force; and, confirming this, enemy guns began to roar, shaking the sky and the steppe; shrapnel exploded ceaselessly, raining iron splinters on the people. Kozhukh issued the order to open fire in response, but did not march. In the day-time white puffs burst forth uninterruptedly over both lines of trenches and gently melted in the air, and each moment of the night the darkness opened as with a gaping fiery throat, and one could no longer hear the noise of the water.

A day passed and a night. The guns roared, and their steel was hot, but the lagging columns did not come. A second day passed and a third, still no sign of the columns. Cartridges and shells became scarce. Kozhukh gave orders to fire sparingly. The Cossacks took heart when their fire was more seldom returned and the enemy did not advance; they decided that Kozhukh's army was tired out, and began to prepare for a massed attack.

Kozhukh had not slept for three nights: the colour of his face was like that of a tanned sheepskin coat; at every step he felt as if his legs sank up to his knees in the ground. The fourth night closed in, flaring constantly with gun-fire.

"I'll lie down for an hour," said Kozhukh. "Wake me at once if anything happens."

His eyes were barely closed when people came running up.

"Comrade Kozhukh! Comrade Kozhukh! Things are bad...."

Kozhukh sprang up, not knowing where he was or what was happening to him. He passed his hand over his face and was suddenly struck by the silence—the guns which day and night had been like rolling thunder were silent, only the clatter of rifles filled the darkness. Things were bad—it meant hand-to-hand fighting. Perhaps the front was broken. He heard the noise of the river....

He ran to headquarters. Saw that all their faces were grey. He lifted the telephone. Good thing they had captured those Georgian telephones.

"It's me—the commander."

A voice like the squeak of a mouse spoke to him:

"Comrade Kozhukh, send reinforcements. I cannot hold my position. A massed attack. Officer units."

Kozhukh answered stonily into the receiver:

"I cannot send reinforcements, there aren't any. Hold on to the last man."

"I can't," was the reply. "The attack concentrates on me, don't let me down."

"Hold on as you are told. We have no reserves. I am coming presently."

Kozhukh no longer heard the noise of the river. He heard only, rolling in the dark before him, to right and left, the clatter of rifle fire.

Kozhukh began to give an order but did not finish it. "Hur-rah-ah-ah!..."

Despite the darkness things were clear to him—the Cossacks had charged in, hacking right and left—there was a breach—a cavalry unit had broken through.

Kozhukh darted forward and collided with the commander with whom he had just spoken.

“Comrade Kozhukh—”

“Why are you here?”

“I cannot hold out any longer—there’s a breach—”

“How dare you desert your unit?”

“Comrade Kozhukh, I have come personally to ask for reinforcements.”

“Arrest him!”

Out of the inky night came shouts, the sound of crushed bones, firing. From behind carts, bales, the black shapes of the houses, a revolver and rifle flashes stabbed the darkness.

Who were their own people? Who were the enemies? Who the devil can tell? Perhaps their own people were destroying one another ... perhaps it was all a nightmare?...

The aide approached; Kozhukh could make out his figure in the darkness.

“Comrade Kozhukh!”

His voice was agitated: the fellow wished to live.

And suddenly the aide heard:

“Well, it’s the end, is it?”

An unusual voice, an unusual voice for Kozhukh! Shots, shouts, groans. And somewhere in the depths of him, unconsciously, instantaneously, somewhat maliciously, the aide thought:

“Ha ... so you are like the rest of us—you wish to live, too.”

But that was only for an instant. It was dark, one could see nothing, but one could sense the stoniness of Kozhukh’s face from his usual voice which came like rusty iron through his clenched teeth.

“Send a machine-gun from headquarters to the breach at once. Gather all the staff workers, baggage men; beat back the Cossacks to the carts as far as you can. Send a squadron to attack their left flank.”

“All right!”

The aide vanished into the night. The shouting, firing, groaning, and trampling continued. Kozhukh broke into a run. Right and left rifles flashed; darkness spread for a hundred yards around where the Cossacks had broken

through; but the soldiers had not scattered, they had withdrawn and, lying under what cover they could find, were firing back. In the blackness one could discern groups of the attackers running forward, nearer and nearer. Then they lay down, and the soldiers aimed at the tiny fiery tongues which stabbed the darkness.

The machine-gun from headquarters was dragged up. Kozhukh ordered his people to cease fire and to shoot only when told. He seated himself behind the machine-gun and was at once in his element. Right and left were flashes and clattering. When the soldiers hung fire the enemy rushed forward, shouting "hurrah!" They came near; separate figures were discernible, running forward in crouching postures grasping their rifles.

Kozhukh gave a command:

"Shoot in volleys!"

He fired the machine-gun.

Rat-tat-tat.

And like black ninepins the figures toppled over. The enemy ranks wavered, broke, ran back, thinning. Impervious darkness again. The firing slackened, and gradually the noise of the river became audible, gathering volume.

And behind, in the depths of the darkness, the firing and the shouts also grew fainter—the Cossacks, having no support, scattered, abandoned their horses, crawled under carts, scrambled into the black huts. Ten of them were taken alive. They were slashed with swords across their mouths which smelt of vodka.

When dawn broke, a platoon of soldiers led the arrested commander to the cemetery. They came back without him.

The sun rose and shone on the irregular chain of dead bodies; they looked as if they had been left by an unevenly receding tide. Where Kozhukh had been in the night they lay in heaps. A brief armistice was arranged. Kozhukh allowed the bodies to be taken away lest, rotting in the ardent sun, they brought pestilence.

When the dead had been removed the guns again began to talk, again the inhuman clamour rocked steppe and sky and beat heavily upon one's breast and brain.

Steel exploded, splinters and lead rained from the blue; the people went about with their mouths open to relieve the strain on their ears; the motionless dead waited to be taken to the rear.

Though the cartridges began to dwindle and the caissons were becoming empty, Kozhukh did not move. There was still no evidence of the lagging columns. He hesitated before the responsibility of deciding what to do and called a council: to remain meant death for all; to break through meant death for the lagging columns.

XXXV

Far behind, in the vast steppe camp, carts, horses, old people, children, wounded: talk and din in the twilight. The twilight was blue, and the smoke of camp-fires was blue.

The fighting was taking place a mere fifteen versts ahead, beyond the rim of the steppe, the ground shuddered underfoot heavily and continuously with the remote clamour; but they were used to it, they ceased to notice it.

The twilight was blue, the smoke was blue, the distant forest was blue.

And between the forest and the carts the abandoned field was mysteriously blue.

Talk and clamour, the voices of beasts, the rattling of pails, the crying of infants, and the red glow of innumerable camp-fires.

Into this peaceful, domestic confusion came something born of the forest, something strange and remote and alien.

At first it was a faint long-drawn *a-a-a-a!* From the blue of the twilight, from the murk of the forest ... *a-a-a!* Then something black appeared which separated itself from the forest—a clot, then another, a third. And the black shadows unfolded, drew themselves into a continuous wavering line along by the forest, rolling towards the camp, growing in size, and with it came rolling, growing, swelling with alarm, that formidable—*a-a-a!*...

All heads, of people and beasts, turned to the dim forest whence rolled that dark uneven strip and from which came instantaneous flashes.

Heads were turned, the camp-fires glowed red.

All heard it ... the earth was filling with the heavy stamping of horses' hooves which drowned the remote shuddering booming of the guns.

"A-a-a-a-a...."

Amidst wheels, shafts, camp-fires, voices tossed full of foreboding.

"The Cossacks ... Cossacks ... Cos ... sacks!"

The horses stopped munching, pricked up their ears, dogs that had come nobody knew whence crouched under the carts.

None fled, nobody attempted to save his life, all gazed into the deepening twilight at the dark oncoming avalanche.

The great stillness, resounding with the hollow stamping of the horses, was pierced by the cry of a mother. She seized her child, the last that remained to her, and pressing it to her bosom rushed to meet the avalanche that came on with the stamping of hooves.

"Death! Death! Death is coming!..."

That contagious cry took wing and was taken up by thousands of people.

"Death! Death...!"

All of them seized what came to their hand, a stick, a handful of hay, a shaft, a kaftan, a branch, the wounded their crutches—all in a frenzy of terror waving these sham weapons in the air, surged forward to meet death.

"Death!... Death!"

Children ran, clinging to their mother's skirts, crying in thin voices:

"Death ... death...."

Out of the deepening dusk the galloping Cossacks, grasping their merciless swords, discerned countless rows of swaying infantry moving towards them like a tremendous tide, countless raised rifles and black banners, swaying; they heard a great rolling animal roar:

"Death...!"

Instinctively, without command, the reins became taut as bowstrings, the galloping horses stopped, tossing their heads, sitting back on their hind legs. The Cossacks became silent, stood in their stirrups, and stared at the black oncoming rows. They knew the habits of these devils—to charge breast to breast without a shot and then to begin hellish bayonet work. So it had been since their appearance from the mountains, ending with night attacks when these devils silently appeared in the trenches. Many Cossacks had fallen in their native steppes.

And from behind the carts from the numberless camp-fires, where the Cossacks thought to find crowds of unarmed, defenceless old men and women, to spread

panic like wildfire from the rear in all the units of the enemy—ever new war-like masses came pouring and their ominous cry filled the darkening night:

“Death...!”

Seeing that there was neither end nor limit to it, the Cossacks turned, lashed their horses with their whips, and the scrub and trees crackled in the forest.

The first ranks of the running women, children, wounded, and old people stopped with the cold sweat on their faces: before them was only the black, silent empty forest.

XXXVI

Four days the guns had been roaring when scouts reported that a new general with cavalry and artillery had joined the enemy from Maikop. At the council it was decided to force their way through in the night and to move on without waiting for the lagging columns.

Kozhukh issued the following orders: first, gradually to cease fire towards evening so as to lull the watchfulness of the enemy; second, to carefully sight the guns on the enemy trenches, fix the sighting, and stop firing for the night; third, in the darkness to move the regiments in files closer to the heights, to the enemy trenches, being careful to raise no alarm, and to lie there; fourth, to complete all movements of the units by 1.30 a.m., at 1.45 a.m. to open a running fire of ten shots each from all sighted guns; fifth, after the last shot at 2 a.m., to make a general infantry attack on the trenches. The cavalry regiment would remain in reserve to support the units and pursue the enemy.

Huge black and sagging clouds appeared and hung motionless over the steppe. On both sides the guns fell strangely silent; the rifles were mute, and the noise of the river again became heard.

Kozhukh listened to that noise—something serious had happened. Not a single shot, whereas during the previous days and nights cannon and rifle fire had been incessant. Perhaps the enemy intended to do what he himself had planned—their two attacks would meet, the advantage of surprise would be lost, they would break against each other.

“Comrade Kozhukh!”

The aide entered the log-house; after him came two soldiers with rifles and between them a disarmed, pale, and low-statured soldier.

"What's that?"

"From the enemy—a letter from General Pokrovsky."

Kozhukh sharply scrutinised the little soldier with narrowed eyes. The latter, with a sigh of relief, thrust his hand into his shirt, searching for something.

"I was taken prisoner," he said. "Our people were retreating—well, seven of us were taken prisoner. The others were tortured to death...."

He was silent a moment; one could hear the noise of the river; beyond the windows was darkness.

"Here's a letter. General Pokrovsky—he swore at me like hell," and he added bashfully, "and he swore at you, comrade. 'There,' he said, 'give the bastard that.'"

Kozhukh's eyes danced as he hurriedly read the lines General Pokrovsky had written:

"You, scoundrel, who dishonoured all the officers of the Russian army and fleet by joining the ranks of the Bolsheviks, thieves and ragamuffins, remember, bandit, that it is the end of you and your tramps: you shall go no further, because you are surrounded by my troops and those of General Heimann. We have got you, scoundrel, and we shall not let you go. If you crave mercy, which means to be sent for your misdeeds only to the punitive company, I command you to execute this order of mine as here stated not later than today. You must pile all your arms at the Belorechenskaya Station, and take your disarmed horde to a distance of four or five versts west of the station; when that is done advise me at once at the 4th railway siding."

Kozhukh looked at his watch and at the darkness beyond the windows.

Ten minutes past one. "So that's why the Cossacks hung fire, the general is awaiting an answer." Messengers came continually with reports—all the units had got close to the enemy positions and were lying ready.

"Good ... good," Kozhukh thought to himself and silently, calmly, stonily regarded them with narrowed eyes.

In the darkness beyond the windows the hurried clatter of a galloping horse merged into the noise of the river. Kozhukh's heart sank.

"Only fifteen minutes left. What could it be?"

Somebody dismounted from a snorting horse.

"Comrade Kozhukh," said a Kuban rider, breathing with effort and wiping the sweat from his face, "the lagging column is coming up."

Then Kuzhukh saw everything in a dazzling-bright light, the night, the enemy's positions, General Pokrovsky and his letter, remote Turkey where his, Kozhukh's, machine-gun had mowed down thousands of men while he, Kozhukh, had remained unscathed—had remained alive to lead his comrades out. Now he would save not only his own column but also the thousands who, helplessly plodding behind, had seemed doomed to the Cossacks.

Two horses which seemed black in the darkness raced through the night. The black ranks of a strange army began to enter the village.

Kozhukh dismounted and went directly into the brightly lit house of a rich Cossack.

At the table, bolt upright in all his giant's stature, stood Smolokurov drinking strong tea from a glass. His black beard was set off handsomely by his trim sailor outfit.

"Hail, brother," he said in his smooth bass voice, looking down affably from his height at Kozhukh. "Would you like some tea?"

"In ten minutes my people attack. The units lie against the very trenches. The guns are sighted. Order you second column to attack on both flanks and victory is certain."

"I shall not give the order."

Kozhukh snapped his jaws:

"Why?"

"Because they have not come," said Smolokurov good-naturedly and smilingly looking down on the short, ragged man.

"The second column is entering the village. I have just seen it myself."

"Well, I shall not give the order."

"Why?"

"Why, why, you are just whying!" said Smolokurov in his rich, bass voice. "The men are tired and must rest. Were you born yesterday? Can't you understand?"

"If I beat them," Kozhukh thought, "I'll beat them alone...." He was dominated by the emotion of the thought.

"Well," he said quietly, "at least lead them into the station as a reserve, and I'll use my own reserves to reinforce the attacking units."

"I shall not give the order. My word is sacred, you know that."

The sailor paced from one corner to the other, and his huge figure and previously good-natured face wore an expression of mulish obstinacy.

Nothing could hammer common sense into him now. Kozhukh was aware of that; he said to his aide:

"Let's go."

"One moment." The chief of staff rose and going up to Smolokurov said persuasively:

"Yeremei Alexeich, you could send them to the station, they would be in reserve, anyway."

Behind his words was the thought: "If Kozhukh is beaten we shall all be slaughtered."

"Well, what—I was just—in fact I have nothing against it.... Take the units that have come up."

Nothing could move Smolokurov when he was set on a thing. But pressure from an unexpected quarter caused him at once to surrender.

His black-bearded face relaxed good-naturedly. He clapped his huge paw on the shoulder of the shorter man.

"Well, brother, how are things? You understand, brother, we are sea wolves, and on the sea we can do anything—turn the devil himself inside out, but on land we know no more than pigs know about oranges."

And he burst out laughing showing dazzling teeth from under his black moustaches.

"Want some tea?"

"Comrade Kozhukh," said the chief of staff in a friendly tone, "I shall write out the orders at once, and the column will be moved to the station to act as reserves for you."

The implication in his mind was, "Well, brother, whatever you did, you couldn't manage without us."

Kozhukh went out to the horses and in the dark said to the aide in a low voice:

"Remain here. Go to the station with the column. Report to me from there. I won't trust them further than I can see them."

The soldiers lay in long rows clinging to the hard earth, the heavy night pressing down upon them. Thousands of

eyes, keen as those of beasts, stared into the darkness, but all was quiet in the Cossack trenches. Only the river was heard.

The soldiers had no watches, but in each of them the tension of expectancy coiled ever tighter. The night was heavy and quiet, and each felt the dragging slowness of the two hours. Time was flowing in the incessant clamour of the water.

And although all awaited this very thing, the night was suddenly and unexpectedly rent by fiery purple explosions. Thirty guns roared, full-throated and without respite; the Cossack trenches, invisible in the night, were marked by a continuously breaking necklace of blinding shrapnel bursts which revealed the irregular line along which men were dying.

"That's enough of it ... enough...!" was the tortured thought of the Cossacks who pressed close to the dry walls of their trenches, expecting every moment the broken night to close once again over the nerve-racking clamour. But the purple flashes continued, the same roar reverberated heavily in the earth, chest, and brain, the same sudden groaning of writhing people here and there....

Then, as suddenly as it had been torn open, the darkness closed again, shutting down with instant silence upon the quivering purple flashes and the inhuman roar of the guns. Above the trenches sprung up a black stockade of figures, and a new roar, a living, animal roar, burst forth. The Cossacks staggered out of the trenches, loath to have anything to do with the Satan, but it was too late: the trenches began to overflow with dead bodies. Then they manfully faced their enemy and began to use their swords and bayonets.

Yes, it was the Satan power; for fifteen versts they followed in pursuit, covering those fifteen versts at a run in an hour and a half.

General Pokrovsky mustered the remnants of his Cossack hundreds and officer battalions, and led them, enfeebled and bewildered, towards Ekaterinodar, leaving the way clear for the ragamuffins.

XXXVII

Straining their whole strength, hollowly beating the earth, the serried, ragged, smoke-begrimed ranks marched along, their knitted brows covered with dust. And

beneath their brows burned the tiny dots of pupils, fixed on the hot quivering edge of the desert steppe.

The hastening guns rumbled heavily. The horses tossed their heads impatiently in the clouds of dust. The gunners kept their eyes fixed on the remote blue horizon line.

With continuous din the baggage train dragged on endlessly. Lonely mothers walked by strange carts, making the dust fly with their bare hurrying feet. On their dark faces shone everlastingly the dry glitter of unshed tears. They, too, did not take their eyes off the remote blueness of the steppe.

The wounded tramped on, caught up in the general haste: one limped on a foot bandaged in grimy rags; another, feverishly working his shoulders, took big strides with his crutches; yet another clung exhausted, with bony hands, to a cart. But all kept their eyes intent upon the blue distance.

Tens of thousands of inflamed eyes strained forward: there lay happiness, there lay the end of their torture and fatigue.

The native sun of the Kuban country glared above.

One heard neither song, voice, nor the gramophone. And all of it—the endless creaking in clouds of whirling dust, the hollow pounding of horses' hooves, the reverberant tread of heavy feet, the anxious swarms of flies—all of it flowed for tens of versts in a rapid stream towards the alluring mysterious blue distance, which, at any moment, might give up what they looked for, causing them to cry out, "Our people!"

But no matter how long they marched, how many villages, farms, settlements, and hamlets they passed—it was always the same thing, always the blue distance receding farther and farther, always remaining as mysterious and inaccessible as before. Everywhere they passed, they were told the same:

"Yes, they were here, but now they are gone. They were here the day before yesterday, then they suddenly rose and departed."

Yes, they had been here: one could see tethers; everywhere hay lay scattered; everywhere there was horse dung, but now there was emptiness.

Here the artillery had made a halt, there remained the grey ashes of cold fires, and the heavy tracks of artillery wheels turned from the village to the road.

The old tapering poplars on the roadside showed deep

white wounds where the bark had been torn, where the axles of the carts had grazed them.

Everything bespoke their recent presence. To join them the army had marched through the shrapnel of the German battleship, had fought the Georgians, had lost its children in the mountains, had furiously fought the Cossacks—but always, incomprehensibly, the blue distance receded. As before there was a hurried sound of hooves, a creaking of hastening baggage carts, swarms of pursuing flies. The hollow, unquenchable noise of endless footsteps; the dust, hardly keeping pace, rising in clouds over the tens of thousands of marchers; tens of thousands of eyes, hopeful, never despairing, riveted on the limit of the steppe.

An emaciated Kozhukh, with charred skin, rode grimly in his gig, his small grey eyes narrowly screwed up, peering at the remote line of the horizon. For him, too, it mysteriously and incomprehensibly remained blank. His jaw was tightly set.

So village after village and farm after farm; day after day passed, spent with exhaustion.

Cossack women came out to meet them and bowed low. Hatred smouldered in their kindly welcoming eyes. And when they had passed, these women followed them with wonder in their eyes that these people had neither killed nor robbed, although they were brutes loathsome to behold.

During the night halts, Kozhukh heard reports: always the same thing—ahead the Cossack units gave right of way without firing a shot, neither by day nor by night, closing together behind them when they had passed.

“Good! They have been burnt,” said Kozhukh, the muscles of his face working.

He issued orders:

“Send mounted messengers to the baggage trains and to all units, telling them not to lag. All halts are forbidden. They must move on and on. Allow only three hours for rest in the night.”

And again the creaking baggage train struggled on, the spent horses pulled on the traces, the artillery guns rumbled with ponderous haste through sultry noonday dust, under the star-bestrewn darkness of the night and in the early drowsy dawn the eternal din trailed over the Kuban steppes.

"The horses drop from exhaustion, there are laggards in the units," they told Kozhukh.

And through clenched teeth he ordered:

"Abandon the carts. Put the loads on other carts. Keep an eye on the laggards, pick them up. Push the speed. We must move on and on!"

And again tens of thousands of eyes were riveted on the distant line, which day and night encircled the steppe, hard and yellow after the harvest. And as before in villages and farms, the Cossack women, concealing their hatred, said pleasantly:

"They're gone—they were here yesterday."

They looked around with aching hearts—yes, it was always the same, the cold remains of fires, littered hay and dung.

Then suddenly along the baggage train, through all the units, among the women and children the news crept:

"The bridges are being blown up. They are going away—blowing up bridges behind them."

Granny Gorpina, her eyes staring in terror, muttered through her parched lips:

"They destroy the bridges. They are going away and destroying the bridges after them."

The soldiers, holding their rifles in petrified hands, said in hollow voices:

"They've blown up the bridges. They're running away from us and have blown up the bridges."

When the head of the column came to a river, brook, precipice, or marshy place, all saw gaping boarding and splintered piles sticking out like black teeth—the road was suddenly broken before them and hopeless despair began to seize them.

Kozhukh, with knit brows, issued commands:

"Repair the bridges, organise crossings, collect all who can use an axe. Send them ahead with the vanguard. Take beams, planks, and girders from the population, and carry them to the head of the column."

Axes began to knock, white chips flew glittering in the sun. And across the swaying, creaking, roughly erected bridge the crowd streamed again, the endless baggage trains, the ponderous artillery, horses snorting and squinting in fear at the water on both sides. Endlessly flowed the human stream and, as before, all eyes once again turned to the spot where the line separated the steppe from the sky.

Kozhukh assembled the commanding staff and said quietly, the muscles of his face working:

"Comrades, our own people are running away from us as fast as they can."

Grimly they answered him:

"Yes. We do not understand it."

"They are going away and blowing up the bridges. In these circumstances we cannot hold our own long, scores of horses are dropping dead. The people leave the ranks, lag behind, and the Cossacks will cut to pieces all the laggards. For the time being we have taught the Cossacks a lesson, they are afraid, they leave the road open to us, the generals take their armies out of our way. All the same, we are in an iron circle, and if things go on like this, it will soon finish us. We are not rich in cartridges, and shells are scarce. We've got to wrench ourselves out of this."

He looked around at them with sharp, narrowed eyes. All were silent.

Then Kozhukh said emphatically, speaking through his teeth:

"We must break through. If we send a cavalry unit the Cossacks will cut them to pieces, because our horses are worn out. Any success will give the Cossacks heart to fall upon us from all sides. We must do something else. Somebody must break through and let them know we're behind."

In the silence Kozhukh said:

"Who volunteers?"

A young man rose. "Comrade Selivanov, take two soldiers, and go in the automobile, all out! Break through at any cost. Tell them there, it's us. Why are they running from us? Is it our doom they desire?"

Within an hour the car stood waiting at the headquarters' hut. It carried two machine-guns, one fore and one aft. The driver in a greasy tunic, intent and restrained, with a cigarette in his mouth, busied himself around his machine, making final adjustments. Selivanov and the two soldiers had young faces, and strain lay deep in their eyes.

The car sputtered, pulled out, and raced off, raising dust and boring into the distance, becoming all the time smaller, till it dwindled into a spot and vanished.

And the endless crowds, the endless baggage trains, the endless horses streamed on, knowing nothing of the automobile, streamed on without stopping, peering grimly

into the far blue distance, sometimes with hope, sometimes with despair.

XXXVIII

The storm tearing to meet them howled. On both sides of them huts, roadside poplars, wattle fences, and distant churches flashed by and disappeared instantly. In the streets, in the steppe, in the villages, and along the road, people, horses, and cattle had barely manifested their fear when the automobile disappeared, in a cloud of whirling dust, leaves, and some straw which had been caught up.

The Cossack women shook their heads.

"They must be mad. Whose car is it?"

Cossack scouts, horse patrols, and units let the furiously tearing automobile pass, taking it for one of their own, for who else would dare get into the thick of them? Sometimes, as an afterthought, they fired a shot or two at it, but what of that? It only bored into the air in the distance and spent itself, and that was all.

Thus, amid din and whistling, mile after mile flew past. If a tyre had burst or something had broken, it would have been the end of them. The two machine-guns looked out intently, and four pairs of eyes intently watched the road that raced towards them.

Its furious breathing merged into a thin wail, the automobile raced on. Its passengers were scared when they came to a river littered with splintered piles. Then they darted off again, made an enormous detour until they found a crossing that had been knocked together roughly by the population.

In the late afternoon the white belfry of a big village church loomed ahead. Orchards and poplars quickly emerged and grew, white huts ran up to meet them.

Suddenly a soldier began to shout and turned to his companion, his face completely changed.

"Our pe-o-ple!"

"Where? Where? What are you saying?"

But even the roar of the racing automobile could not drown the soldier's voice.

"Our people! Our people! Over there!"

Selivanov sat up angrily, not to be disappointed if it should be a mistake.

"Hur-rah!"

Towards them a patrol was riding with red stars flaring like poppies on their hats.

At the same instant above their ears sang the familiar, thin dzee-ee-ee, again and again, like the sound of mosquitoes. And from the green orchards, from behind the wattles, from behind the huts came the echo of rifle fire.

In Selivanov's mind flashed the thought, "Brothers against brothers". And desperately waving his hat he screamed out in a breaking voice:

"Friends ... friends!"

Fool, as if in the tumult of the racing automobile one could hear anything. He himself understood it and gripped the driver's shoulder:

"Stop, stop! Put on the brakes!"

The soldiers crouched behind the machine-guns. The driver, whose face had become drawn in these few seconds, clamped on the brakes, the automobile was suddenly wrapped in smoke and dust, and its occupants thrown forward, while two singing bullets went slap into the upholstering.

"Friends! Friends!" the four yelled at the top of their voices.

The shooting continued. The horse patrol, snatching the carbines from their shoulders, were galloping, shooting from the saddle, keeping their horses away from the road to leave a clear range for invisible riflemen firing from the orchards.

"They'll kill us," said the driver through stiff lips, stopping the automobile and leaving the wheel.

The patrol dashed up at a gallop—ten black muzzles pointblank. Some of the cavalymen, their faces distorted with fear, flung themselves from their horses, swearing savagely:

"Hands up! Get away from the machine-guns! Get out!"

Others, with pale faces, leapt from their horses, shouting:

"Cut 'em to bits! What are you waiting for? They're bloody officers, damn them!"

Unsheathed sabres flashed.

"They'll kill us." Selivanov, the two soldiers, and the driver instantly jumped out of the automobile. When they were in the midst of the excited horses' heads, raised sabres, and pointed rifles, the tenseness relaxed, because the four men had left the machine-guns the sight of which had infuriated the cavalymen.

Then, in their turn, Selivanov's party let their curses fly:

"You're crazy—we're your own people—your eyes must be in your backsides. You might have killed us, and that's something you couldn't have undone. To bloody hell with the lot of you!"

The cavalrymen cooled down. "But who are you?"

"Who-o! Ask first, then shoot. Take us to headquarters."

"How could we tell?" said the cavalrymen, somewhat crestfallen, again mounting their horses. "Last week an armoured car dashed up and began shooting. There was quite a panic! Get in."

The four again got into their automobile. Two cavalrymen climbed in with them, the others prudently surrounded them with carbines in their hands.

"Comrades, don't go too fast with your automobile, else we can't keep up with you. Our horses are spent."

They approached the orchards and entered the village street. Soldiers on the way stopped and shouted fiercely: "Kill them! Where are you taking them?"

The shadows of the warm evening were long and slanting. There was the sound of drunken singing. Along the road, from behind the trees, gaped the frameless windows of wrecked Cossack huts. The abandoned carcass of a horse emitted a foul stench. The street was littered with scattered hay. Behind the wattle fences were bare fruit-trees with broken branches. During the drive through the village not a chicken, not a pig, could be seen either in the long street or in the yards.

They stopped at headquarters which was in the spacious house of the priest. In a dense growth of nettles by the porch, two drunken men lay snoring. Soldiers were playing cards near the guns in the square.

They pushed through the crowd into the presence of the commander of the detachment.

Selivanov, happy and excited by his recent experiences, told of the campaign and the battles with the Georgians and the Cossacks; in his eagerness to relate all that bubbled up in him, he skipped from one thing to another.

"Mothers ... children over the precipices ... carts into the ravines ... all cartridges spent ... barehanded..."

And suddenly he stopped short; the commander, his hand over his stubby chin and long moustaches, sat hunched up without interrupting, his eyes hostile.

The commanding staff, all young men, stood or sat around listening, their tanned faces unsmiling, stony.

Selivanov felt the blood flush to his neck, throat, and ears, and came to an abrupt stop, saying in a suddenly hoarse voice, "Here are our papers." He thrust his papers towards the commander.

The commander pushed them towards his assistant, who began to examine them casually but with a predetermined air. The commander, who did not take his eyes off Selivanov, said with emphasis:

"We have very different information...."

"Excuse me," said Selivanov, his face suffused with blood, "do you take us for...."

"We have very different information," the other went on quietly and with insistence, ignoring the interruption, his eyes steadily observant, his hand still over his chin and long moustaches. "We have precise information that the entire army that marched out of the Taman Peninsula perished on the Black Sea coast, destroyed to a man."

Silence ensued. Through the open windows from the direction of the church came loud cursing and the drunken voices of soldiers.

"They are demoralised," thought Selivanov with a strange feeling of satisfaction.

"So documents prove nothing to you? Is this the way to treat us? We break through to our own people at the cost of incredible effort, after an inhuman struggle, and here...."

"Nikita," the commander spoke to his assistant quietly, taking his hand from his chin. He rose, straightened his long body, and stood in thought, his long moustaches drooping.

"What is it?"

"Find the order."

The assistant rummaged in his portfolio, produced a paper and handed it to the commander who laid it on the table and, standing erect, began to read it aloud. He read it in such a way as to emphasise the foregone conclusion of all those present, himself included.

"COMMANDER'S ORDER No. 73

"A radio-telegram of General Pokrovsky to General Denikin has been intercepted. It reports that from the sea and the direction of Tuapse an innumerable horde of

ragamuffins is advancing. This savage horde consists of Russian prisoners back from Germany, and sailors. They are well armed, have many guns and supplies, and a great quantity of valuable loot. These armed swine defeat and sweep away all in their path: the best Cossack and officer units, Cadets, Mensheviks, and Bolsheviks."

The big man covered the paper with the palm of his hand, which he rested firmly on the table, and fixing his gaze upon Selivanov, he repeated with emphasis:

"And Bolsheviks!"

Then he lifted his hand and, still erect, resumed reading:

"In view of this I order you to continue the retreat without a halt. To blow up the bridges behind you, to destroy all means of crossing, to take the boats to the opposite bank and burn them to the last bit of timber. The unit commanders are responsible for the good order of the retreat."

Looking intently into Selivanov's face without giving him time to say a word, the chief added:

"Look here, comrade. I have no suspicion of you, but you must understand my position. We meet for the first time, and you ought to realise what the report implies. We have no right ... masses have been entrusted to us, we would be criminals if we...."

"But they are waiting there!" exclaimed Selivanov in despair.

"I quite understand. Don't get excited. I suggest that we have something to eat. I dare say you are hungry and your lads, too."

"He wishes to interrogate us separately," thought Selivanov, and suddenly he felt an overwhelming desire to sleep.

During the meal a handsome Cossack woman set on the bare boards a hot tureen of cabbage soup with a film of fat on it which kept the steam in.

"Eat, my dearies."

"Well, you witch, first eat down some of it yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Go on, go on!"

She made the sign of the cross, took a spoon, and dipped it into the soup which at once sent forth steam; she blew and began to drink carefully from the spoon.

"Take more! We know your ways. Several of our people have been poisoned. Beasts! Bring the wine."

After the meal it was agreed that Selivanov should ride back in his automobile with a squadron to accompany him to verify his statements.

The automobile returned slower than it had come, the familiar villages and farms receding in inverted order. Selivanov sat between two cavalymen. Their faces were strained, and they held their revolvers ready. And all around, in front, behind, and on either side, the cavalymen's bodies rose and fell heavily in the wide saddles, and hooves flashed.

The automobile snorted in low gear, the dust trailing lazily behind it.

Little by little the strain disappeared from the faces of the cavalymen in the car, and, to the accompaniment of the engine, they began trustingly to tell their tale of woe to Selivanov: everything was slack, fighting orders were not carried out, they fled before small groups of Cossacks; men deserted in batches from the demoralised units and went where it suited their fancy.

Selivanov lowered his head.

"So. If we meet any Cossacks, all is lost...."

XXXIX

Not a star, and because of that the soft velvet swallowed everything—~~one~~ saw neither the wattle fences, streets, tapering poplars, huts, nor orchards. Small fires were scattered irregularly.

In the vast soft darkness one sensed an invisibly spreading human immensity. Nobody slept. Now and then a pail knocked by somebody in the dark clattered, now and then horses bit one another, and—"whoa-a, steady, you devils!"

Now and then the voice of a mother lulled, "A—a—a! a—a—a! a—a—a!"

A distant shot, but you knew it for one of your own, a friendly shot. The din and voices grew louder, maybe in a friendly argument, a friendly encounter; it quietened down, and again there was only the darkness. And a sleepy voice sang:

Tomorrow I'll become a soldier....

Why couldn't one sleep?...

Far away—or maybe it was under the very win-

dow—there was the crunching sound of wheels on the sand.

"Where are you going? Our people are in camp over there."

But one could see nothing—all was black velvet.

Strange that they were not weary. For had not anxious eyes peered day by day at the remote horizon?

It was as if this September velvet, the invisible wattles, the smell of dry dung belonged to one, were domestic, familiar, precious, had been longingly awaited.

Tomorrow beyond the village there would be the brotherly meeting with the troops of the main forces. Hence the flowing movement of the night, the sounds of hooves, voices, rustle, the crunching of wheels and smiles, tired, drowsy smiles.

Through the half-open door a narrow strip of light fell upon the earth, broke across the wattle, and ran far out over the trampled vegetable garden.

In the hut the samovar boiled. The walls gleamed whitely. The dishes were set. White bread. A clean table-cloth.

On the bench sat Kozhukh; he had removed his belt; his hairy chest was exposed. His shoulders drooped, his arms hung relaxed, his head was bent. He might have been the man of the house back from the field, who had paced the lifelong day, turning over fat black layers with his bright ploughshares and now his arms and legs tingled pleasantly and his woman was preparing supper, and there was food on the table, and on the wall, slightly smoking, glowed the little lamp. He felt a ploughman's weariness, the weariness of labour.

His brother was beside him. He, too, wore no arms. He had taken off his boots and was examining with concentration a completely dilapidated boot. With a thrifty gesture Kozhukh's wife raised the lid of the samovar—a cloud of steam rose from it, she took out a heavy steaming towel, picked the eggs from it, and arranged them on a plate where they lay round and white. In the corner there were dark icons. It was quiet in the part of the house where the Cossack family lived.

"Well, sit at the table...."

But, as if they had been stabbed, all three turned their

heads; in the shaft of light outside appeared one round cap with ribbons, another, and yet another.

The butt-ends of rifles clattered against the floor and there was cursing.

Alexei immediately sprang up saying: "Follow me!" (If only that revolver was at hand!)

He dashed out like a buffalo. The butt-end of a rifle struck his shoulder. He swayed, but kept his feet; the bridge of a nose crunched under his heavy fist, and its owner crashed down with groans and curses.

Alexei leaped over him.

"Follow me!"

He plunged out of the light into the dark and raced in bounds over the beds, breaking the tall stems of sunflowers.

The butt-ends of rifles struck Kozhukh as he dashed out after him. He went down by the wattle; about him sailors' hoarse voices cried exultantly:

"Aha! There he is, hit him!"

Behind, from the hut, came piercing cry, "Help!"

The blows rained upon Kozhukh increased his strength tenfold. He rolled out of the shaft of light, sprang to his feet, and guided by the sounds raced after his brother. Close upon his heels, heavy tramping followed in pursuit, and a voice broken with quick, hoarse breathing, cried:

"Don't shoot, that will bring them running. Hit with the butts of your rifles! There he is ... after him!"

A fence grew up blacker than the darkness. The planks cracked. Alexei leaped over it. With the resilience of a youth, Kozhukh also leaped, and both found themselves in a medley of shouts, blows, curses, rifle butts, bayonets—on the other side of the fence people had been waiting for them.

"Bash the officers! Stick them up on your bayonets!"

"Don't hit ... don't shoot!"

"Caught, the swine! Stab them dead!"

"Must take them to headquarters. They'll be interrogated. Then we'll roast the soles of their feet."

"Kill them now!"

"To headquarters! To headquarters!"

Kozhukh and Alexei's voices were drowned in the black riotous whirlpool. They could not hear themselves in the raging and twisting tangle.

Amid a babble of voices and gross insults they were led on; the crowd jostled them, pressed against them. There

was clanking and swaying of dark bayonets and cursing.

"Have I swum out of it?" The question hung greedily in Kozhukh's mind; he kept his eyes steadily on the light which poured from the windows of the big two-storied school building now being used as headquarters.

As they entered into the shaft of light all opened their mouths and stared pop-eyed.

"Why, it's *bathko!*"

"What's come over you," said Kozhukh quietly, the muscles of his face twitching, "have you all gone crazy?"

"But we—how could it happen! It's the sailors. They came and said, 'We've found two officers, Cossack spies, who want to kill Kozhukh; they must be bumped off. We'll drive out the officers,' they said, 'and you must mount guard behind the fence; when they start running, stick your bayonets in their behinds, that will make them sit down. No good taking them to headquarters. There are traitors there who'll let 'em go. You finish them quick.' Well, we believed them, and it was dark."

"Well, now you go for the sailors," said Kozhukh.

The soldiers dashed furiously in different directions; and out of the darkness came a calm voice:

"They've scattered. Not such fools as to wait to be killed."

"Let's go and drink that tea," said Kozhukh to his brother, wiping the blood from his gashed face, adding, "Post sentries."

"All right."

XL

The Caucasian sun was hot although it was autumn. But the steppe was translucent, the steppe was blue. Gossamer glittered delicately. Poplars with thinning leaves stood in meditation. The orchards were slightly tinted with yellow. The steeple gleamed white.

And in the steppe beyond the orchard was a human sea, like that at the opening of the campaign. But there was something new about it. The innumerable carts of the refugees were the same, but why was the light of inextinguishable assurance shining as a reflection in all their faces?

Here was the same horde of bedraggled, naked, barefoot soldiers—but why had they silently arrayed themselves in endless files as straight as a taut thread, why

did their emaciated faces look as if they had been forged from black iron, and why was the line of dark bayonets as bold as martial music?

And why, facing these, did the long ranks of the clothed and shod soldiers stand loosely, with bayonets askew; why was both confusion and eager expectancy stamped on their faces?

As before, an illimitable cloud of dust had been raised, but it settled under the autumn heaviness, the steppe was clear and translucent, the features of every face could be seen clearly.

In the centre of that first surging human sea there had been an untenanted green mound set with black wind-mills; but now in the midst of this sea of faces, there was an empty space in which stood a cart.

The sea of humans then had surged over the steppe, whereas now it was calm and silent, as if bounded by an iron coast.

They were waiting. A soundless, wordless sense as of triumphant music pulsed in the blue sky, over the blue steppe, and through the golden heat above the vast crowd.

A small group of men appeared. Those who stood in ordered ranks with dark faces recognised their commanders, all as emaciated and as black as themselves. And those who stood in irregular ranks facing these others, also recognised their commanders, well-clothed and with healthy, weathered faces, like their own.

And in front of the first walked Kozhukh, low of stature, black to the bone, emaciated to the bone, ragged as a tramp, and on his feet broken gaping boots which showed his splayed black toes. On his head slouched the ragged dirty brim of what had been his straw hat.

They came up and gathered around the cart. Kozhukh climbed into the cart, pulled from his head the relic of plaited straw, and ran his eyes over his iron ranks, over the numberless carts that trailed off into the steppe, over the multitude of sorrowful, horseless refugees, and then he looked at the ranks of the main forces. There was something wobbly in these last. "They're demoralised!" He felt stirred with deep, concealed satisfaction, which he would not confess to himself.

All had their eyes upon him.

"Comrades..." he began.

They all knew what he was going to say, nevertheless an instantaneous spark lit in them.

"Comrades, we walked five hundred versts, hungry, cold, barefoot. The Cossacks came after us like mad. There were no supplies, neither bread nor forage. People died, rolled down the slopes, fell by enemy bullets, there were no cartridges, we were barehanded."

And although they knew it all—had experienced it, and although the others knew it from a thousand tales—Kozhukh's words shone with a revealing novelty.

"Children were left in the gorges."

And over all heads, over all this vast human sea a moan passed and sank into the heart, sank and quivered:

"Our children.... Oh, woe to us!"

From end to end the sea of humans was stirred.

"Our children ... our children!"

He looked stonily at them, paused, and resumed:

"And how many of our people lie slain by bullets in the steppe, the forests and mountains, lie for ever, and ever?"

All heads were bared, and over the vast crowd to its fringe descended a graveyard silence, and in this silence the low sobbing of the women was like a memorial chant, like graveyard flowers.

Kozhukh stood for a while with bowed head; then he raised his head and, glancing over this great gathering, asked:

"For whose sake did thousands, tens of thousands of our people suffer that torture? For whose sake?"

He again glanced at them and said unexpectedly:

"For one thing—for the sake of the Soviet power, because it is the power of the peasants and workers. They have nothing besides that."

A sigh escaped from countless breasts, it was more than they could bear; solitary tears crept down iron faces, slowly crept down the weathered faces of the welcomers, down old faces, and the eyes of the young girls became bright with tears.

"...For the peasants and workers!"

"That's what it is! For that we struggled, fell, perished, lost our children!"

It was as if the eyes of all were opened, as if a mystery was revealed to them for the first time.

"Good people, let me speak," Granny Gorpina cried, blowing her nose and elbowing her way to the cart, clapping at the wheels. "Let me speak!"

"Wait a bit, Granny Gorpina, lét *batko* finish, let him say what he's got to say. You'll speak after him!"

"Don't you touch me," said the old woman, fighting with her elbows and climbing onto the cart obstinately—nothing could stop her now.

And she cried out, her kerchief awry, and dishevelled wisps of grey hair tumbling in disorder:

"Listen, good people, listen! We abandoned our samovar in our house. When the time came for me to get married, my mother gave it to me as my dowry. She said, 'Mind it as the apple of your eye.' But we lost it ... well, let it be lost! Long live our power and our country! All our lives we bent our backs and knew no joy. And my sons, my sons...."

The old woman began to sob, shedding long-suppressed tears over her unforgettable grief or, maybe, crying with vague joy, unintelligible to her, as yet.

Again the human sea gave a deep-drawn and joyous sigh, which rippled to the very verge of the steppe. Gloomily, silently, Gorpina's old man climbed up into the cart. And they could not very well drag this old man down, this sturdy ancient; tar and the blackness of the earth had eaten into the core of him, and his hands were like hooves.

He climbed up and was astonished to find himself so high, but at once forgot about it; his rough loud voice creaked like an ungreased cart.

"Our horse was old, but it was strong. The gypsies, you know that, understand horses, they looked into his mouth and under his tail and said he was ten years old but he was twenty-three! His teeth were so sound!"

The old man laughed, laughed for the first time. Gathering around his eyes a multitude of radiating wrinkles he burst into a cunning childish, mischievous laugh that ill befitted his cloddy, earthy figure.

And Granny Gorpina clapped her thighs in bewilderment.

"Dear. Lord! Look you, good people, what has happened. He kept silent, silent all his life, silently he married me, silently he loved me, silently he beat me, and now he has started talking! What's going to happen? He must be off his chump!"

The old man at once chased away his wrinkles, knit his beetling brows, and again the ungreased cart filled the steppes with its creaking.

"The horse was killed! I lost all that was in the cart, it was left behind. We went on foot, I cut off the harness and had to throw that away, too. The wife's samovar and all the household rubbish was abandoned, but I, true to God," he roared in a stentorian voice, "don't mind. Let it be so. I don't mind! Because now it is our peasant power. Without it we are dead carcasses and stink like that dead thing under the fence." Then he began to weep, dropping scanty tears.

A swell rose, a tempest swept over them all:

"Ha! It is our own power! Long live the Soviet power!"

"That's what happiness is!" The feeling was like fire in Kozhukh's breast, and his jaw quivered.

"That's what it is!" It flared up with the deep joy of unexpectedness in the iron ranks of the emaciated, ragged people. "It was for the sake of this that we went hungry, cold, exhausted—not merely to save our skins!"

And mothers with broken hearts and undrying tears—yes, they would never forget the hungry, snarling crags, never! But even those awful places, the terrible memory of them, had been transmuted into meek sorrow, had found a place in that solemn and majestic something which thrilled this human mass there, on the steppe.

And those who stood clothed and well-nourished, confronting the iron ranks of the emaciated naked people, were like orphans before this triumph which they had not experienced, and, without shame, tears welled up into their eyes and they broke their ranks, pressing forward, moving like an avalanche towards the cart on which stood the ragged, barefoot, and emaciated Kozhukh. And to the verge of the steppe their cry sounded:

"*Batko* ... lead us where you will! We will give our lives...."

Thousands of hands stretched out to him. They pulled him down, lifted him over their heads, and carried him. And the steppe was shaken for dozens of miles, shaken by innumerable voices.

"Hurrah—a-ah! Hurra-a—a—a—ah for *batko* Kozhukh!"

Kozhukh was carried past where the orderly ranks stood, and where the artillery was lined, he was carried past the horses of the squadrons, and the horsemen turned in their saddles and with shining faces and wide-open mouths yelled continuously.

He was carried past the refugees among the carts, and the mothers held out their children to him.

They carried him back again and set him upon the cart. Kozhukh opened his mouth to speak, and all gasped as if they were seeing him for the first time.

"Look, his eyes are blue!"

They did not cry this aloud because they were too simple to put their emotions into words, but indeed his eyes had turned out to be blue and gentle and with the smile in them of a child—they did not cry this aloud, but roared instead:

"Hurrah for our *batko*! Long life to him! We'll follow him to the end of the world. We'll fight for the Soviet power. We'll fight the landowners, generals, officers...."

And Kozhukh looked out of his blue eyes upon them while in his heart the thought was like fire:

"I have neither father, mother, wife. I have only these whom I have led from death. I, I myself have led them. And there are millions of such people, with a noose round their neck, and I shall fight for them. These are my father, my home, my mother, my wife, my children. I, I, I have saved these thousands, tens of thousands of people, from a terrible death."

It beat in his heart in letters of fire, while his lips were saying:

"Comrades!"

But he had no time to say more. Pushing the crowd of soldiers right and left, a mass of sailors rushed forward. Everywhere were their round caps and fluttering ribbons. They elbowed their way irresistibly nearer and nearer to the cart.

Kozhukh gazed calmly at them; his eyes were steel-grey now, his face was of iron, and his jaws were set.

They came closer till only a thin line of jostled soldiers divided him from them. Then they flooded everything around, everywhere there were only the round caps with fluttering ribbons; the dark cart with Kozhukh in it was like an island among them.

A huge, broad-shouldered sailor wearing a cartridge belt, two revolvers and hung over with hand-grenades, seized the cart. It lurched and creaked. He climbed into it, stood next to Kozhukh, took off his round cap, waving the ribbons, and in a hoarse voice reminiscent of the sea wind and briny expanse, of foolhardiness, drunkenness, riotous living, he roared:

"Comrades! We sailors, revolutionaries, confess our guilt towards Kozhukh and you. We did him injury while he was saving the people, we did not help him, we criticised him, and now we see that we did wrong. All of us sailors gathered here bow low to Comrade Kozhukh, and say from the bottom of our hearts: we are sorry, don't be angry with us."

A great chorus of sailor voices roared:

"We are sorry, Comrade Kozhukh, sorry, don't be angry with us!"

Powerful hands grabbed Kozhukh and began to toss him. Kozhukh went flying aloft, dropping, disappearing among arms, flying up again—and the steppe, the sky, and the people seemed to be turning cartwheels.

"I am done for, the sons of bitches will turn all my innards."

And from end to end thundered shatteringly:

"Hurrah for our *batko*! Hurra—a—ah!"

When he was again set on the cart Kozhukh swayed slightly, and his blue eyes narrowed, smiling a sly Ukrainian smile.

"The sly dogs, they've wriggled out of it. But if I met them in another place they'd flay me alive."

Aloud he said in his rusty voice:

"Let bygones be bygones."

"Ho—ho—ho! Ha—ha—ha! Hurra—a—ah!"

Many orators awaited their turn. Each wished to express what he thought so important and valuable that if he were not allowed to say it, everything would fail. And the mass listened. Those who crowded closely around the cart heard them. Those farther off caught only disjointed phrases. At the fringe of the mass nothing was heard, but all listened with equal eagerness, craning their necks, straining their ears. The women tucked their empty breasts into the mouths of their infants, or rocked them quickly, patting them, and craned their necks to listen.

And strange as it may seem, although they could not hear, or caught only scraps of phrases now and again, they grasped the import of what was being said.

"The landowners are again astir, want their land back."

"They could kiss my ass, but I'd never give it back."

"Have you heard, Panasyuk, there's a Red Army in Russia."

"Why red?"

"It's red—red trousers, red shirts, red caps. Red from

behind and red in front, red'all through like a boiled lobster."

"Go on!"

"I swear it's true. The speaker just said so."

"What I heard was this: there are no more soldiers, they are all called Red Army men."

"Maybe we'll also be given red trousers."

"And they say the discipline is very strict."

"It can't be stricter than what we have here: when *batho* said he'd give us hell we all learned to behave. Just look, we march in ranks as straight as a tight string. And when we passed through the villages, we harmed no one."

They bandied words, catching fragments from the orators, not knowing how to express themselves but feeling that, cut off though they were by immeasurable steppes, impassable mountains, age-old forests, they, too, were creating upon a smaller scale the same thing that was being created there, in Russia, on a world scale, that starved, naked, and barefoot, without material means or any assistance whatsoever, they were creating it here, alone. They did not understand, they did not know how to express it, but they felt it.

The orators spoke until the evening deepened, one after another. As their narrative unfolded, the inexpressibly blissful feeling that they were linked with the hugeness they knew, and did not know, which was called Soviet Russia, kept growing in them.

Innumerable fires shone in the darkness, and above them twinkled countless stars.

The smoke rose gently. Ragged soldiers, ragged women, old people, children, sat wearily around the camp-fires.

As the veil of smoke vanished towards the star-bestrewn sky, so their jubilation waned into intangible weariness around the fires, and the great sea of people fell gently to sleep, smiling.

The fires went out. It was quiet. The night was blue.

REQUEST TO READERS

*Progress Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book,
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